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The Wanderer

A NOVEL OF DANTE AND BEATRICE

by Nathan Schachner



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THIS BOOK IS PRODUCED IN
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To
DINO BIGONGIARI
who has been most generous
in sharing his profound
knowledge of Dante and of
Medieval Italy

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2. CHAPTER FOUR

In that part of the book of my memory before the, which is little that can be read. there is a rubric, saying, Here beginneth the New Life.

La Vita Nuova

THE new life began for Dante Alighieri on the first day of May in the year 1274. He did not know then that it had begun—it was only later that, grown to manhood, he gazed back across the retrospective years to fix in memory this sharp, dividing date.

Just now the sky that peeped between the narrow roofs of Florence seemed delightfully blue, and the May wind breathed country flowers over the offal odours of the street. He tightened his small grip in his father's ink-stained fingers. He felt important. In a few days he would be nine—a mystic number, that, and exceeding lucky. Indeed, hadn't good fortune already come to him? Wasn't he on his way to his first great festival? Hadn't Messer Portinari included him in the invitation as though he were an adult man?

His bosom swelled within the short, buttoned cloak. He tugged impatiently at his father. "Let us hasten, Papa," he cried. "See how high the sun rides over San Martino's church. There isn't a soul stirring in the street. The whole quarter's already gone to the Portinari."

Alighiero Alighieri, notary of Florence, smiled down at his son. "You needn't fear there'll be no seed cakes left. Folco Portinari is no miser when it comes to giving feasts."

"I don't care about the seed cakes," the boy protested. "I want to see the May Queen crowned with garlands, and hear the music. I won't eat any cakes."

"But I wish you to eat, Dante mine," his mother called from the stone doorway of their home. "Sometimes I wonder what holds those delicate bones of yours together, you peck so at food."

"Don't you fret, Mama. I'm really strong. Bicci Donati is older than I, yet I threw him wrestling. Come, Papa."

Alighiero waved to his wife and permitted the eager boy to tug him down the street.

Bella watched them with shadowed eyes—her husband and her son. The street was quiet now. The tall, stone buildings nodded their roofs together over its narrow length. The humble grey of San Martino del Vesovo was silent across the wide piazza. No bells sounded, though the day called for them. Not even the great bell of the Badia.

She sighed. She missed the bells. It was almost a year since she had heard their deep, vibrant tones. But few others in Florence seemed to mind. The blessed Pope had placed the city under the interdict, yet the people jested and went about their affairs with the utmost unconcern. Even the clergy continued to preach behind discreet doors in defiance of Rome and the wrath to come. Bella was a simple, religious soul, and this godlessness troubled her. Almost as much as the pain in her side. The pain was deeper now. It was with her night and day, though she hid it from her unobservant husband. The boy, praise God! was too young to understand. A fear rose in her. Suppose the interdict still lay upon the town when her time was come? Even if the kindly priest of San Martino should decide to give her absolution, would God, for all His mercy, heed if the Pope said nay?

A spasm shook her and passed across her face. She turned and went inside. The pains increased in power as she lay upon the couch. Death came closer to the suffering woman.

Dante had no thought or interdict as he hurried his father to a faster pace. The house of the Portinari stood at the end of the street, and the noise of merriment seeped through the walls from the inner court. Someone was singing—a lute strummed faint accompaniment. Laughter jangled the refrain.

Something of his son's eagerness communicated itself to Alighiero. Not that he was one to be kindled by the music and sensuous verse of the *dolce stil nuovo*—the sweet new style that was sweeping Florence like a lusty broom. These were toys for the young and giddy who had forgotten the plain ways of their fathers. A respectable notary had weightier matters on his mind—such as the will this same Folco wished him to draw on the morrow, and the fate of certain small sums he had out at interest on doubtful security. Even if he wished to forget, the leather pouch that dangled from his belt forbade such treason. It never quit his side—in it were his writing tablets, small horn of ink, and freshly sharpened quill. One never knew when the whim to have a letter written or a business contract drafted might seize a fellow-gossiper, and an extra silver florin was not to be despised, nor even a handful of denarii.

But he had it on his mind to speak privately with Folco, and perchance with Messer Bardi, the banker, if he should find him there. They might be able to help him in his modest claims. They could vouch for him before the great captains of the Guelf party that he, Alighiero Alighieri, had been a loyal Guelf all through the troubles with the Ghibellines. True, he had been inconspicuous in his devotion to the party, and had not flown to arms when the barricades had been

raised in the streets and the crossbow bolts had sped thick as hailstones from the fortress towers. He was a man of peace and like to sicken at the sight of blood. The dagger at his side served no more formidable purpose than to slit open waxen seals and carve parchment into neat, clean squares. Nevertheless he had been in danger during the long years when the Ghibelline bravados lorded it over Florence. Therefore it was right that he be recompensed now out of the confiscated estates of the Ghibellines. He didn't ask much. He was a moderate, reasonable man and knew he hadn't gone into exile with the more vehement Guelfs, nor had his business suffered too much from his convictions. He didn't ask for a share in the vast holdings of the proud Uberti or the Lamberti, for example; he had his eye merely on a very tiny villa across the Arno, close to the Ponte Vecchio. It was hardly more than a thatched hut, with a vineyard and an orchard of figs and medlars, and its Ghibelline owner had died at Benevento with Manfred in the very year little Dante had been born. A poor enough morsel compared to what the Adimari and the Donati had seized; yet the Guelf notables had long dangled him on the string, saying neither yea nor nay to his proposal. Yes, the Bardi were the ones to push his case. They were papal bankers, and their connections were invaluable in the present effort to lift the interdict from the town. The Party wouldn't dare refuse them.

Filled with these inspiriting thoughts, Alighiero lifted his eyes, and as promptly lowered them. "Now San Giovanni help me!" he groaned. "What cursed madness forces my eyes upward always at this very spot? Does the spirit of my kinsman still hover by his dwelling to remind me of my shame?" He crossed himself hastily, ejaculating, "God forbid!"

Little Dante felt his father's hand torn from his grasp, heard his disordered muttering, saw the trembling movement of his fingers in the air.

Thrust bewildered from his own excited thoughts, he cried, astonished: "What ails you, Papa? What are you saying?"

"Nothing, son; nothing," Alighiero caught his hand again. "Let us hurry. In truth, we are late."

But the barred door in the small house opposite flung violently open. A woman stared out at him with dark, hating eyes. She was clad in widow's weeds, and her face was ravaged with much weeping.

"Ha, there you go again, shameless Alighiero!" she shouted wildly. "Each day you pass my door to remind me that my poor, dear Geri is still unavenged. Have you no pity on his wretched soul, or for my bitter grief?"

Alighiero cast uneasy glances along the quiet street. "Hush,

Vanna!" he said, in low, conciliatory voice. "I go merely to Messer Portinari; I assure you I don't pass this way to plague you."

"Aye, go to your feasting and your pleasures while his spilt blood is unappeased and his murderers flaunt their crime with open mockery. Alas, what scornful fate gave my husband such a weakling cousin as his sole surviving kinsman?"

The badgered man lifted his head, and his voice took on unwonted firmness.

"Harken, cousin! Since you compel me to it, let me remind you that Geri del Bello had harmed the Sacchetti mightily before they fell upon him with the sword. He went from one to the other in secret and whispered scandal and sowed discord until they were like to have slain each other first. I am a man of peace, Vanna, unused to arms and feuding. Why should I offend the laws of God and man and bring the blood guilt against my own small son?"

"Because it is your duty. The very donkey-drivers snicker at you for a coward behind your back." She covered her face with her hands and sobbed. "Each night Geri comes to me. His headless trunk spouts gouts of blood, and he swings his head from gripped fingers as though it were a lantern. His eyes roll terribly at me and his tongue, slit down to the very gorge, tries vainly to speak. At midnight he vanishes, and I awake all in a sweat."

Alighiero shuddered. "It is a phantom from Hell!"

"It is my husband," the woman cried. "If his soul suffers thus in Hell, it's because the Sacchetti slew him with all his sins upon him. It's for you to do the same to them; only then will his spirit cease to haunt me."

"You don't know what you're saying, woman," Alighiero muttered uneasily.

The boy listened to this strange colloquy with horror, yet with an irresistible fascination. The words wound themselves into the sensitive folds of his imagination and shaped themselves into a vision.

The street fell away from him; and all of Florence. *He stood on the edge of a deep pit, with a cliff rising sheer behind him. The pit was filled with blood and lurid flames flickered over a wild, fantastic landscape. In the blood, knee-deep, waded an innumerable horde. Among the foremost strode his cousin, Geri del Bello, just as his wife had described him. The head peered up and twisted indignantly in the hand that clutched it. The hand raised and stabbed an accusing finger at the boy. The trunk and lantern-head moved out of sight and others took his place.*

"Behold!" said a voice behind him, "the sowers of scandal and schism, punished by a just God. Behold Mohammed, the great Schismatic, holding his entrails with both hands. See Ali, his son-in-law, as he goes weeping,

cleft in the face from chin to forelock. There follows him Bertrand de Born, the singer of songs, parted likewise head from trunk. Here his sons avail him not, for he set King and King's son against each other."

A devil with dripping sword sprang headlong among the sobbing multitude. The sword slashed out and down with great, swift strokes. At each stroke a throat was pierced through, a nose was lopped off, an ear fell with a splash into the swirling red, and wails tore the hideous air.

Then wails and voice together ceased and the vision flashed from Dante as lightning departs from heaven. The paved stones of the street thrust solidly against his feet and the warm air bathed him in a sweat. Horror and pity stained his cheeks.

"When I grow up, Madonna," he averred in a trembling voice, "I'll kill the Sacchetti for you. I swear it."

Vanna stared at the small, quivering boy. Her face softened. "You are a good lad, Dantino. I don't know how you come from such a father. But think no more of killing and suchlike. Go to your festival and enjoy as becomes your age."

With a contemptuous look at the notary she slammed the door so that the street echoed with it.

Father and son walked on again, but with a slower pace. Alighiero did not look at the boy. He had been shamed before him. What thoughts about his father revolved in his small son's head? He sighed. It was difficult to be a man of peace in a city of violent deeds.

Gradually Dante lost his shaking. The vision moved into a recessed nook of memory, there to take its place beside the other visions. He did not fear them any more. They came on him unbidden, springing full-formed at a word, a gesture, a sight beheld, or even an odour riding on the breeze. They were as real to him as his home, his playmates, and the clothes he wore. They came and they departed. There were people in them—people he knew and strangers he had heard about, places he had seen and places that existed only in the ferment of his imagination. He accepted them all, the known and the unknown, the splendid and the horrible, as an equal part of reality. But he never spoke of the visions—to father or mother, or even to his playmates. They belonged to him alone.

Face still averted, Alighiero said: "Wake up, Dante. We have arrived."

CHAPTER II

From that time forward, Love quite governed my soul.

La Vita Nuova

THE servant ushered them through the dim, mat-strewn hall, past the great, bustling kitchen whose open door gave a glimpse of spitted roasts dripping and hissing into the fire, then out again into the clear sun of the courtyard. The boy drank in the scene with every greedy sense alert, storing the motley of impressions in the tidy compartments of his mind—each image coin-bright and sharply discreet, never to lose its freshness or memory.

The courtyard was a well of moving colour and shifting sound. The walls rose sheer and grey, and the red-tiled roofs slanted against the outstretched sky. Long tables made a closed encirclement of the central court. Their spotless banquet clothes were heaped with trenchers of golden-crackling geese, partridge, and pheasant, of chines of beef and haunches of venison, of tender suckling pigs and boars with the fangs still agape in the bristly snouts. Flanking the solid meats were fried eels but a day out of the Arno, huge pink salmon, and brown, flaky trout from the mountain streams of Fiesole. Fresh figs drowned in clotted cream, dates, long and meaty, small golden oranges, and candied lemons, cakes, tarts, and pastries filled the interstices. And, thrusting upward through the confusion, stood great two-handled goblets filled with good red Tuscan wine.

Servants passed back and forth in endless stream, hurrying more heaped platters to the feast, removing gnawed bones and the carcasses of vanquished birds, filling the diminished goblets. They jostled each other and jogged elbows against the passing guests; toothsome morsels spilled and slid to the flagstones beneath. To their fellows they shouted angrily: "*Arri! Arri!* You donkey, can't you see where you're going?" To the magnate whose ermine-lined *pelliccia* they had stained with scarlet jelly they murmured obsequiously: "A thousand pardons, Messer Jacopo! I am but a clumsy ass worthy of your stick!"

The more solid and elderly of the guests were already at the tables. They dotted the benches with broad, bent backs, cloaks flung back to avoid the spatter of food. They ate with gusto and they drank mightily. Between whiles they conversed. They complained of the rising cost of *calimala*—the fine, imported wool cloth upon which the prosperity of Florence was largely based. Their voices rose as they recounted the iniquities of the incumbent Podestà. A money-changer waved a half-

eaten drumstick. "But what can you expect of a Bolognese, Messers? I've never met a one who wasn't a pander or greedy for gold." No one disputed the charge.

A wool merchant shrugged. "Oh, well, next month we'll turn him out."

"And then, pray what?" sneered the money-changer "We'll get a worse rascal from Milan or Siena."

An apothecary emerged from his goblet of wine. "Sometimes I think," he declared, wiping his beard, "we did no wise thing to call in foreigners to act as the chief magistrates of Florence."

The wool merchant chuckled. "Think you we'd do better with our home-grown rascals?" A silence fell upon the table. Everyone remembered the too-recent struggles between Guelf and Ghibelline. Most of them were Guelfs, praise God! But the apothecary had been sympathetic to the Ghibellines. So had some of the others. They turned hastily to the business of eating.

But the women, and the younger folk, had still not settled down to feasting. The women were dressed in bodices of scarlet silk interwoven with threads of gold. Their long trains swished behind them as they walked. Little silver purses jangled from girdles drawn tight above their curving flanks. They gathered in gossiping groups where the talk was of the latest fashions and the utter silliness of the sumptuary laws that had been recently passed. They patted their bracelet-studded arms and smoothed the elaborate bodices that were flaunting violations of the laws. "As though, my dears," shriled the wife of a judge, "we should go back to coarse cloth gowns and pale, unrouged cheeks just because our ancestors had no better! Is there no such thing as progress? Must we still attire ourselves like peasant women of the field?" The women nodded like magpies. "I don't notice the members of the Council arraying themselves in leather jerkins and clasps of dirty bone like *their* grandfathers," declared another. "What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, say I!"

The young people took no part in such arid talk. It was May day and the soft spring raised such a ferment in their veins they were like to boil over in sheer delight. Their youthful faces made a vivid wall around the pavilion that had been raised in the very centre of the court. The pavilion was draped in crimson silk, and a young man and a young woman, garlanded with flowers and holding golden sceptres in their hands, sat enthroned upon it.

Little Dante clapped his hands in excitement. "The Lord and Lady of Love!" he exclaimed. "Don't they look just like Mars and Venus?"

Alighiero surveyed his son with stern disapproval. It was the moment to regain his shaken parental authority. "Your thoughts

range too much on heathen themes," he admonished. "Mars and Venus, indeed! Don't you know they are demons waiting only the chance to carry your immortal soul off to Hell? That's what comes of listening to the trashy tales of the jongleurs in the Mercato Vecchio. It's high time the Council slit the tongues of those beggarly vagrants and sent them packing. If you'd pay more attention to the edifying stories of the blessed Virgin and the Saints, you'd be better off."

The boy thought the wandering minstrels very fine, indeed! Their bold, dark faces, hollowed with sun and infrequent meals, their jaunty caps and battered voils held all the fascination of the strange and far-off. He would scamper away to the great open square of the Mercato Vecchio at the first scrape of bow and lift of high, cracked voice, and wriggle eel-like through the horde of merchants, pedlars, pilgrims, friars, dart past the open butcher-stalls, the tables of the money-changers, the intent group of dice-players who rattled their points on the stone steps of holy Sant' Andrea herself until, panting, he stared upward at the jiggling elbows of the jongleur and heard throat and instrument merge in tuneful ballade. The tales of the blessed Saints, even of San Giovanni himself, were all very well, but they held not the lilt of these Loves and Venuses that came fresh and dewy out of fabulous Provence.

Nevertheless he averted his eyes in decent submission and said, "Yes, Papa."

Just then a youth in silken finery sprang upon the pavilion, tilted the lute he carried, and began a soft, melodious strumming. A girl moved up beside him, clad in white and green, with spring lilies thrust into her bright, brown hair. They faced the seated, sceptred pair, bowed low. Then the girl sang in a light, pure voice, while the lute strings twined around the words and sent them soaring against the sky.

At the first note the company broke into a patter of hands, and little Dante, former meek submission forgotten, gave a joyful cry.

"*Al cor gentil ripara sempre amore,*" she sang.

*"Love only in the gentle heart abides,
As in the verdant forest dwells the bird,
Love was not ere the gentle heart was made
Nor gentle heart created before love . . ."*

Alighiero looked annoyed. He felt like a fool hesitating so long at the entrance to the courtyard. But no one seemed to pay any attention to the newcomers, and he was not one to elbow his way boldly through a throng. He began to feel sorry he had come.

But a portly citizen with well-fleshed face, redder now with busy exertions, came towards him with outstretched hands.

"Welcome, Ser Alighiero! Welcome, good neighbour! I wondered if Donna Bella had grown more ill that you didn't come."

The notary beamed; all his ill-humour vanished. "I was delayed a trifle by one seeking a small loan, Messer Folco," he explained. "But what makes you think my wife is ill? She does well, except for her usual woman's complaints."

Folco Portinari surveyed his friend keenly. His own wife had told him something of the Bella's ailment. Yet he held his peace. Why trouble the man if he didn't know?

He patted Dante's dark, tousled head and changed the talk. "Why, what a little man your son is!" he smiled. "I haven't seen him for a while and he's grown tall and straight. My children have been complaining of his absence."

"He hangs around the markets," Alighiero said sourly. "Every time a rascalling singer comes to town he needs must be there to listen."

The boy wriggled with indignation. He did his lessons, didn't he? He had even started to spell out Virgil from a tattered manuscript the monks of the Bodia had lent him after many anxious admonitions as to its safekeeping. A retort burned on his tongue and withdrew silently. One did not dispute one's father in the company of elders.

But Messer Folco chuckled over the lad. "Come now, Alighiero! In the spring of youth the blood flows more hotly than in our older veins. A little hanging around the markets won't hurt him. Now do you go, Dante, and make your peace with Manetto and Beatrice. You've been neglecting them, you know. You'll find all the children on the other side of the pavilion. They're pretending at their own King and Queen of May." He drew his arm through Alighiero's. "Come inside a moment and leave this noisy madness. I have a matter to talk over."

"So have I with you."

They disappeared into the house. The boy teetered indecisively from foot to foot. He would have preferred staying where he was and watching the grown-up Court. The thought of childish prattle and thin, treble voices essaying adult songs set his teeth on edge. He had a vast disgust for anything that was less than perfection. Manetto was a good fellow. He was older, in fact, than Dante. But Beatrice was a baby. Why, she was almost a whole year younger than himself! What had they in common any more, now that he was practically nine?

But Messer Portinari's word was not to be disobeyed; and they might emerge at any moment and catch him loitering. Reluctantly, with many a sidelong glance at the noble show, he threaded his way through the crowded yard and around to the rear of the pavilion.

The noise of the children was like the dispersed, yet insistent, chirping of sparrows against the stronger, clearer melody of a sun-borne lark. They made a little group of their own, swaying confusedly with internal play, yet compact in the round against the world of their elders. A table had been set up for them, laden with sweetmeats, seed cakes, and other delicacies to tempt the childish palate. They chattered and laughed, snatched cakes to thrust whole into their mouths, and laughed again. Their holiday clothes were gay with colour, and their round little faces gleamed with merriment and stuffed content.

Dante's feet dragged a trifle as he approached. His ears strained back towards the girl who was singing. He could hardly make out the words any more, though he knew them by heart. *Everyone* knew Guinizelli's canzone.

A dark-faced, scowling boy broke angrily from the group in sudden quarrel. His black, bent brows made an imperious line, and his thickish lips spat heated words at the resentful lad who faced him.

"And I say it's *my* right to choose the Queen, Manetto. I choose my sister, Piccarda."

Manetto Portinari dug at the flagstone with his toe. He had a rounded body and a fair, chubby face. His light-blue eyes blinked rapidly. "It isn't fair, Forese," he protested in a quavering voice. "After all, it's *our* party. Why can't my sister, Beatrice, be the Queen?"

Forese's laugh was scornful. "*That* baby!"

"She's no more baby than Piccarda," Manetto retorted in some heat. "In fact, she's six months older."

A little girl in a dress the colour of new spring grass laid her hand timidly on the arm of Forese. Her small, delicate face was screwed tight in an effort to hold back the tears. "Please, brother Bicci," she begged. "Let Beatrice be Queen. I really don't want to be anything."

Forese—nicknamed Bicci—thrust her hand away. "You keep quiet, Piccarda," he said roughly. "A fine thing it would be for a Portinari to queen it over a Donati! Where's your pride, you little fool? What would our brother Corso say if he heard?"

Manetto shook with the insult. He was of an age with Forese—about eleven—and almost as tall. Yet he dared not say what was on his tongue. The Donati were a fierce and ancient clan, and given to lording it over lesser folk in Florence. Corso Donati was the most feared man in town. When he rode along a street, followed by his armed retainers, people prudently took to the wall to let them pass. Manetto had heard his father speak about it many times. Even the rise of the People's Government hadn't altered matters much. Therefore Manetto, cheeks quivering, looked indecisively around as if in search of allies. His eyes lit on Dante.

"Suppose we leave it to Dante Alighieri," he cried eagerly. "Let him decide."

Bicci stared at the little boy. His first impulse was to refuse. Wouldn't it be silly to let a fellow who wasn't nine—and even lower in the scale of family than the Portinari—judge on a matter of precedence? But he liked Dante. For all his girlish features and dreamy ways there was something strangely intense and passionate about the boy. Now Bicci was a man of the world, given to good eating and a careless roistering, as became a member of a proud line of nobles; yet he felt dimly that there were depths to his playmate he never would be able to plumb. And, for all his slender, smaller figure, hadn't Dante unexpectedly thrown him the last time they wrestled together?

Suddenly he chuckled. "All right, then, Manetto. Let Dante decide." He picked up a handful of sweetmeats, stuffed them in a single mass into his mouth. His jaws worked on the sticky lump. "Go ahead, youngster. Who's to be Queen—Piccarda or little Beatrice?"

With a start Dante brought his wandering attention from the pavilion to the frozen group of children. "What's that?" he asked in confusion.

Someone laughed, and the blood rushed red to his cheeks. Bicci laughed also. "Always wool-gathering, aren't you?" He repeated the question.

The boy shook his head. He felt annoyed. What did he care which of two babies would be Queen? Why couldn't they all just stand and watch a *real* Court of Love instead of setting up a rival imitation of their own? Listen to that melting, liquid lute; the rise and fall of the girl's warm voice!

He stared almost angrily at little Piccarda. He didn't see Beatrice around and he didn't want to. The child met his peevish gaze in a brave attempt. But the attempt failed, and a tear trickled down the softness of her cheek. He stirred uneasily. He was fond of Piccarda. In the dim, receding days before he became almost nine he had played with her. Why, he was as much her big brother as Bicci was—he had no sister of his own, or brother, for that matter. If the child wanted to be Queen—and for all her timid refusal he knew it would please her—let her be. He'd steal over to the other side of the pavilion later on and open eyes and ears to the full. He smiled encouragingly on the little girl.

Bicci grinned and stared around at the silent children in triumph. Everyone could see that Dante was going to choose Piccarda. Manetto had made his own trap and fallen right into it.

Manetto saw the same thing. "But aren't you going to look at Beatrice, too, before you judge?" he cried in alarm. He raised his voice. "Beatrice! Beatrice! Where are you? What are you hiding for?"

The press of children opened. Someone shouted: "There she is, Manetto, standing by the table. Hey, Bice, don't you hear your brother?"

Dante thought: "What's the difference? I'll say *Piccarda* and be done with it. Then maybe they'll let me alone." But a sense of justice stirred in his breast. After all, they took this game of choosing seriously.

They had made a double line, crowding back upon each other, with a wide pathway between. He let his eye travel indifferently up the open way.

Beatrice Portinari stood close to the table, her small, pale-gold head rising barely above the rim. Her face was turned from Dante towards the great pavilion, and her lips were slightly parted as though to drink in the sweet sounds. Her slender, tiny figure was clad in a flowing dress of subdued and goodly crimson, girdled with a girdle of gold beneath her unformed bosom. So rapt was she in the music that she did not seem to have heard the loud controversy or the shouted questions of her brother.

Dante threw her a quick, careless glance. He had been just and fair. He had seen her. Now he would turn again to *Piccarda*.

In the quietness of the waiting children the voice of the singer rose high and clear.

*"Beloved lady, when one day my soul
Before her God appears, then will He say:
'What! Art thou come throughout all Heaven to me
And tookst me for the likeness of thy love?' . . .
Then must I say: 'Oh, my beloved seemed
An angel of thy kingdom!
My love account not unto me as sin!'"*

She ended, and the lute thrummed softly into silence. A hush fell upon the listening youths and maidens; that momentary hush of rapture before the bursting clap of hands returns them to the solid earth again.

Beatrice stirred slowly. For the first time she seemed aware of the unheard squabble and the open space around her. Lips still parted, she turned. Her small, pure face lifted inquiringly towards Dante. Their eyes met.

A trembling fell upon the boy. His limbs began to shake so that he was certain all the world could see. From the most secret chamber of his heart to the least pulse of his outer body all things leaped and moved in tune. A mist rose before his eyes and filmed the courtyard with a golden glow. Framed in that glow, as in a halo, was the small, pure face of Beatrice. It was a gentle face, grave beyond its years. Yet her eyes smiled on him. They were green eyes, of the colour of emeralds and the sunny sea. They dazzled and held his own with an ache that was most pleasurable in its pain.

He tried in vain to stop the wild confusion. Was this in truth Beatrice he saw, he cried, or was it a vision? Sometimes at night he would come awake, and the darkness of his narrow room opened upon the vast glories of heaven. Voices beat down upon him, and the rush of great, untiring wings. Shining robes of white enfolded him and the voices pierced him through and through. But the faces of the angels he could never see, nor their eyes. Hard as he looked, heart yearning and ablaze, faces and eyes evaded him until, with a moan, he fell back upon his pallet and the darkness closed swift upon him.

Now, as he gazed, his trembling ceased. The sun poured down, sudden and strong. The light bathed Beatrice in a bath of splendour. Each feature shone distinct, yet merged in a harmonious whole. He heard himself cry out; yet it was an inner cry. He knew now what the angels looked like. Here, waking, he saw what had been denied him at night.

A passion seized him, and a great wonder. A voice spoke: "Your beatitude has now been made manifest unto you. Here is the deity who shall henceforth rule over you!"

"This is Love!" he thought, and the trembling started all over again. "She is my Lady through all my life!" The small boy felt a surge of exultation; yet mingled with the exultation was a curious fear. Childhood was gone from him; at a bound he was a man. There would be misery and pain, and many sorrowful nights. Well, let there be! Beatrice, too, had been a child to his unseeing eyes. Now she was woman. Nay, more than woman! He had seen this moment what the busy world had not yet seen; perhaps would never see. It didn't matter. It was sufficient that *he* knew the truth. The closing lines of the song hummed softly in his mind.

*Then must I say: "Oh, my beloved seemed
An angel of thy kingdom!
My love account not unto me as sin!"*

Someone was shaking him roughly by the shoulder. It was Forese. "What's the matter with you, you little ninny?" he cried, enraged. "Must we wait all day on you while you stare like a mooning calf? Hurry with your answer, or by San Giovanni . . ."

A strange smile played around Dante's lips.

"I choose," he said, "Beatrice for Queen."

As a clamour broke from all the children, and Forese fell back, unbelieving, stunned, Dante's heart shouted until the heaven of stars filled with the cry:

"I choose Beatrice for Queen!"

CHAPTER III

*In my mind is fixed, and in my love,
The image fatherly and dear and kind
Of you still hour by hour up there above
Teaching how man eternally may live.*

Inferno

THE servant ushered father and son into a small, book-strewn room and said: "Pray, be seated, Ser Alighiero. I go to tell my master you are here." He was clad in a close-fitting black that showed the calves of his legs, and he spoke Tuscan haltingly.

Alighiero stared after the man and sank into a chair. "Well!" he ejaculated. "I must say Ser Brunetto gives himself airs! A French lackey! But then, he claims his long exile in France has made him as much a Frenchman as a Florentine." He turned on his son. "Now remember your manners, Dante. Ser Brunetto Latini is a busy man and overwhelmed with public affairs. It was a great favour of him even to consider you as a pupil."

Dante stood listlessly by a table, his long, slender fingers turning the vellum pages of a manuscript volume. The title page was illuminated in red and gold, and the title, done with many a painstaking flourish, declared: *LIVRE DU TRESOR par Brunetto Latini*.

"I don't want to be his pupil," he said, in a low, stubborn voice. "I don't want to be a notary. I'd rather go to the Minorite School of Santa Croce."

Alighiero knitted his brows in anger. "Enough of such talk!" he said. "You pick on the Minorites so as to have an excuse to lengthen the term of your idleness. It would be different if you wished to study theology and become an abbot; perhaps, God willing, even a bishop. But your mind runs only on poets and vain jingles, and hanging out on street corners, and staring into people's windows. You needn't tell me you don't, either. Messer Folco tells me he's caught you time and again slinking around his house like a thief, seeking a way to get in. Yet when, in the goodness of his heart, he invites you indoors to play with his children you gulp, stammer, turn red like any lout, and run away. What manner of conduct is this for a grown boy of thirteen who should be thinking of his future?"

Dante winced and a flush mounted the delicate contours of his face. He bent closer over the crackling pages. So Messer Portinari had spoken to his father! He had hoped he wouldn't. Yet he couldn't blame him. He would never blame him, no matter *what* he did. The father of

Beatrice was sacred, a being set apart from common men by Divine choice.

Yet the talk and the coarse phrases his father had employed soiled the infinitely pure texture of his love. How could they understand? How could he bring himself to tell them? He bit his lips and bent his head still lower. "Never!" he cried fiercely to himself. Tortures multiplied would never wring the truth from his lips. They would only laugh indulgently, as at a childish folly; and the laughter would pierce him like a thousand knives. To them—to her own father—Beatrice was just a child, a growing girl of twelve, no different from other children. Their perceptions were blunted because they were men of the world and given to worldly things. Divinity resided in their midst and they didn't know it. Beatrice! Blessed one! Youngest of angels, whom God had permitted for a space to visit earth! What if others refused to admit the fact, it was enough that he, Dante Alighieri, had witnessed it.

Play with her, indeed! Did one play with a holy angel? Did one bandy words with a spirit from God? Even the troubadours of Provence dared not sully their ladies with common contacts; they were content to sing their lays and worship from afar. He stared unseeing at the half-understood French of Ser Brunetto's book. He made a vow. Someday he, too, would celebrate in song the virtues of his blessed lady. It would be a mighty task, and he must fit himself for it. How, therefore, could he become a notary? He had seen too many notaries. They were all alike: men with their noses close to the ground, scorers of visions, deriders of enthusiasms that could not be transmuted into parchment legalities and hoarded coin. His own long, delicately tapered nose twitched; his eyebrows, black and thinly arched like those of a girl, flattened into a line. However his father might storm and command, no matter what this Ser Brunetto might say, he would refuse to study the notarial art.

The door opened quietly and an old man came into the room. "Welcome, Ser Alighiero," he greeted. "I am always glad to see a member of our noble profession."

Alighiero rose hastily and bowed with respect. "A thousand pardons for intruding upon you, Ser Brunetto. I know how busy you are with affairs of state."

Brunetto smiled and fingered the costly ermine lining of his cloak. "I've just returned from a mission to Lucca," he admitted, "and the Council wish me to respond to the speech of the Cardinal Legate at the forthcoming peace between our factious Guelfs and Ghibellines. But," he added kindly, "that does not prevent my being of service to a fellow-notary. After all, was I not president of the Guild?"

"And a most excellent one," Alighiero assured him. He lowered his eyes. "It's a pity I haven't been able to attend meetings of late."

Brunetto dropped his voice as one does in the presence of bereavement. "Yes, of course. It's six months since your dear wife died, isn't it?"

"Seven." He sighed deeply. "She was a good woman. She never spoke of her ailments."

"It is the will of God, my friend." Ser Brunetto stroked his beard and looked hard at Alighiero. "Yet He is always ready to comfort the grief-stricken. I hear of a certain Lapa . . ."

The notary grinned sheepishly and made a sidelong gesture towards his son. He hoped Dante hadn't heard. He didn't know how the boy would take this new venture he intended into matrimony. There were people who might think that he was acting with indecent haste. Resentment stirred in him. Why should they? It was man's estate on earth to marry and multiply. Bella—may her term in Purgatory be short—had given him but one child. He was entitled to more. It became his position and his dignity. And Lapa was a buxom, hearty lass whose generous hips and bosom betokened a ready fertility. Besides, her father, Chiarissimo Cialuffi, was a man of substance and had expressed a willingness to give a proper dowry with the girl. Alighiero had sustained recent losses in his loans—might the Devil carry off the souls of all absconding debtors!—and the money would prove a welcome addition to his depleted funds.

Brunetto understood. "Well, let us get down to business," he said briskly. He turned to the silent boy. "I understand, my Dante, you wish to follow in your father's footsteps. A most praiseworthy desire."

Dante didn't lift his eyes, but the fair text became a shadowy blur. His slender body began to tremble. His mother was dead, yes! Her image rose before him, dear and sad. Her large, sorrowful eyes, set in a face wasted with disease, followed him anxiously as they had always done in life. He had taken his mother for granted, as small boys usually do; but he had loved her. Nightly he prayed for the quiet of her soul. In dreams he heard her soft, answering voice bidding him not to mourn. She was with God and well content.

He bent lower to blink the tears away. And now his father was going to remarry! Was his mother already forgotten? Was that all that marriage meant? He thought suddenly of Beatrice, and his eyes filled again.

"Dante!" said his father sharply, "don't you hear Ser Brunetto speaking to you?"

He stiffened, raised his head. For the first time he gazed directly at the important man. There was defiance, almost hatred in his glance.

"You understand wrong, Ser Brunetto," he said, in quiet tones. "I do not desire to become a notary."

"Dante!" cried his father again. "I warn you——"

"Let the lad be," interrupted Brunetto. He gazed meditatively on the defiant, quivering boy. There was more to the youngster than showed on the surface. That delicate, girlish face with the first fuzz of manhood tender on the cheeks, the chiselled pencilling of nose and brows, were belied by the strange, deep passion of his eyes and the unformed strength of his pointed jaw.

"What," he inquired gently, "do you wish to be?"

The boy's eyes flashed. "I wish," he said, "to be a poet."

Alighiero threw up his hands in despair. "He is mad!" he exclaimed. "For my sins I have raised an ungrateful monster. Do not listen to him."

But the old man stopped him with a gesture. An answering gleam quickened in his tired eyes. His seventy years lightened their load, and the wrinkles under his snow-white beard seemed to smooth to the freshness of youth.

"Mad, my Alighiero? Then I too am mad. Have I not written?" He pointed to the manuscript. "It's true I wrote the *Tresor* in prose, because its matter required such sober form. But my *Tesoretto*," and his voice became soft and gentle, as if he were speaking of his youngest and dearest child, "is poetry."

"The cases are not alike, Ser Brunetto. It is true you have written; but it is the sport of an idle moment. You are the master of all notaries, a public figure, an orator whose noble speeches have swayed our Council, whose advice is listened to with respect."

Brunetto sighed. "I am all of that," he acknowledged, "yet were I to choose all over again, I'd be a poet. I hope to live on earth in my *Tesoretto*; not in my deeds or in my speeches." He beamed on Dante. "You have read my book?"

"No, sir."

The old man looked disappointed. "Oh, well, I shall lend you a copy. Hmmm! I don't mind telling you, Alighiero, I hadn't intended taking your son as a pupil. I am a busy man, and the few boys who come to me for occasional instruction are already more than I can handle. But—look now, my Dante, you are too young to make such a weighty decision. Nor does one become a poet offhand. It is much more than a matter of putting words together and making rhymes. One must know life; one must have lived and suffered and struggled. One must know the Holy Fathers and the Blessed Book; Aristotle and the ancient Romans, pagans though they were, and their Law. Above all, one must know virtue and the path to the eternal life. I can teach you that, and how to become a notary as well. Then, when you have reached manhood you can decide. What do you say?"

The boy's eyes fixed on the benevolent visage of the old man. He

read each wrinkle carefully, as if his life depended on its decipherment. He stared at the smooth, bald forehead, the snowy beard through which peeped startlingly a full-fleshed, almost sensual mouth. Then his heart began to pound. He could hardly breathe. His dreams, his hopes, the aspirations that had fed his sleeping and his waking hours were about to become true. He would become a poet! Notary? He didn't need the quiet wink that lowered Ser Brunetto's heavy lid to tell him that was a sop for his father. A warm gush of love for the understanding old man flowed through his being. *This* was his father; nay, more than father!

"Why, sir," he stammered, "if you will—if you will have me, I promise you——"

"Then that is settled," Brunetto said quickly. "Come tomorrow at the first stroke of matins. Be prompt, or you shall feel my staff. I've no time for laggards."

"I'll be here before the sun."

"Nor do I wish to be awakened in the dead of night," the old man smiled. He drew Alighiero aside. "Did I not handle the lad right?"

"I don't know," grumbled the notary. "I don't believe in yielding to his nonsense. But—well . . ." He spread his hands. It wouldn't do to contradict Ser Brunetto. No doubt in time he would wean Dante from his crazy desires and make him into a respectable notary. Under such sponsorship he would go far. Besides, it would take the boy's mind off the marriage. The date was already set. Before the month ended, he and Lapa would enter the little church of San Martino. It would be a quiet wedding, they had agreed, so as not to make too much talk.

Each morning, at the first quiver of dawn, Dante hurried through the narrow streets of Florence towards the house of Ser Brunetto Latini. The donkey-drivers stared at the hurrying boy curiously, their eyes screwed against the morning light like tailors sharpening their gaze upon a threaded needle. "*Arri! Arri!* Giddap!" they called after him mockingly, and beat their donkeys on with the same harsh tune. Country carts lumbered past, drawn by oxen, bringing produce to the city market. Their peasant owners, clad in rough canvas shirts and breeches, drowsed on the seats and paid no attention to the boy. Here and there a door opened, a sleepy burgher blinked and shivered in the raw air, crossed himself, pulled his long, hair-lined cloak tightly about him, and started for church for matin prayer to fortify himself against the sinful business of the day. A pallid-faced roisterer, tunic splashed with stale-smelling wine, legs buckling beneath him, looked dismal in the dawn.

Dante paid no attention to these usual customary morning sights. But, quickly as he sped, he always paused a moment before the still-dark façade of the Portinari Palace. His eyes glowed and his heart yearned towards the shuttered window high in the overhang. There

slept the lady of his adoration—Beatrice! The name echoed within the recesses of his mind like the angel harmony of the spheres. How apt a name, he thought, for such a she. Blessed one! Beatified one!

The window was closed and silent, as were the others. He was glad of that. He would have died of shame had one been suddenly opened, and a Portinari, or a gossiping servant, caught him staring upward with all his soul showing in his eyes. Nor did he wish to meet his lady face to face, to talk and pass the idle time of day. It was enough to adore the heavenly creature from afar, to catch occasionally a fleeting glimpse, as one glances quickly at the dazzling sun and pulls one's eyes away for fear of blindness.

Still staring at that closed containment of his beloved, he vowed, "Some day, some day, oh, Beatrice, I shall write songs of you that have never yet been written of any mortal lady!"

Then, fortified with high resolve, the boy hastened on to the Via de Cerchi and the home of Ser Brunetto.

Three other boys shared with Dante the benevolent wisdom of the teacher. One was a great, overgrown fellow of fifteen with pimply face and small, ever-shifting eyes. He was Pietro de' Cerchi, whose uncle's massive establishment loomed formidably a little way down the street. Though he was an orphan and dependent on the bounty of his uncle, he bragged incessantly, lazed over his lessons, and whispered luscious tales of his female conquests to the other youngsters. Ser Brunetto was tempted sorely at times to thrust him out into the street, but Vieri de' Cerchi wished his ward to be prepared for admission to the Law School at Bologna, and Vieri de' Cerchi was not lightly to be denied. He was a famous banker and trader, with tentacles of money stretched all over the world; vain, arrogant, uncouthly ostentatious, as became a man but lately risen from obscurity. Already Florence felt the rude hand of his power, much to the discontent and gnawing envy of such ancient, if impoverished, nobles like the Donati with whose old influence he was meddling.

The second pupil was Mosca di Galli, whose father had lost all his possessions as a Ghibelline and had been permitted only recently to return from exile. He was a plodding student, without brilliance, smiling uneasily as became a suspect son of a Ghibelline at the heavy witticisms of the Guef, Pietro, and seeking industriously the means of future living in the dry deeds and merchant contracts Ser Brunetto set for him to copy.

The third was younger than Dante, barely twelve, and very like a girl in build and aspect. His hair fell in golden ringlets that framed soft, liquid eyes, pouting lips, and a timid, oval face that any young beauty would have been proud to own. His name was Andrea Borsiere, and

his father was a purse-maker. Dante wondered why Ser Brunetto bothered with a boy whose family was of no importance and whose father, belonging to one of the lesser guilds, actually stitched with his needle alongside of his working men. He, himself, as Alighiero had repeatedly told him, came of a noble line, though fallen now on evil days. Was he not descended from the ancient and mighty line of the Elisei, and had not his great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguida, followed the Emperor Conrad to the Crusades and fallen bravely in battle against the infidel?

Dante did not like his fellow-pupils. Pietro's coarseness and vile talk filled him with a physical nausea. One day, when the lout, discovering his distaste, attempted to force his anecdotes upon him, he flew at him in such a fury of fists and feet that the bigger boy went down in a tangle of benches, copybooks, and ink horns, squalling and bellowing for his very life. Ser Brunetto, busy with a client in another room, came hurrying at the wild uproar and pulled the raging youngster off his prey.

"What is the meaning of this?" he shouted. "You, Dante, speak up."

The boy's fists were still tight-clenched; his face was white with fury. "Let Pietro tell you, sir," he said.

"Well, Pietro?"

Pietro lumbered to his feet, wiping blood and ink from his puffed face. "He hit me. I didn't do anything."

"A likely story. He's hardly half your size. Will you tell me now, Dante?"

"No, sir."

"Very well, then. You tell me, Mosca."

But the Ghibelline boy denied hastily having seen how it started. He was, he averred, intent upon his copybook when the fighting began.

Ser Brunetto didn't press him. He understood the precarious position of the lad. A staunch Guelf himself, he felt compassion for the humbler Ghibellines who had crept back to Florence and still weren't certain of their welcome. He hoped devoutly that the coming peace treaty which Cardinal Latino was bringing direct from Rome would heal the grisly wounds of long domestic warfare.

He turned to little Andrea and his expression softened, as it always did when he spoke to his youngest pupil. "Well, my pretty one, perhaps you will tell me?"

The boy looked at his mentor with wide, innocent blue eyes. "Yes, master," he answered readily. "Pietro said things."

"What things?"

"Well, first he talked about a whore he visited in the via Por Santa Maria. He said she had big breasts and a hairy——"

"That's enough, little one," Ser Brunetto said hastily. The veins on his forehead swelled like cords. His voice was low, and all the more

terrible. "This is the last time I shall warn you, Pietro. Uncle or no uncle, the next time you speak filth in my house I shall denounce you to the magistrates. Do you understand?"

Pietro wiped his bleeding mouth with his sleeve. "Yes, master," he said sullenly.

After that he gave Dante no trouble. He sulked by himself and one day appeared no more. Vieri de' Cerchi, it seemed, had used his influence so well that the boy was admitted to Bologna under a complaisant Master who promised to push him through the Bachelor's disputations and enter him in the Law School with an equally complaisant Doctor.

They all breathed easier when he was gone. But the scars of his presence remained with Dante. He felt besmirched, corroded. Were there two kinds of love in the world, then? Was this vile thing that Pietro practised and leered about also love? What relation did it have with the noble flame celebrated by Guinizelli, by Arnaut Daniel, and Sordello? What possible connection could it have with his own adoration for Beatrice? At the mere juxtaposition he shuddered and flung himself more fiercely into his studies.

For Mosca he felt neither pity nor rancour. The boy was one of those prefigured from birth to a life of plodding nothingness. All his days were doomed to obscurity, without good, without evil; a dreary waste of passing moments which, added up, made zero. When he died the world would be no worse off; nor better. To Dante, filled with pride and high ambition, eager to scale the tops of all that rose before him, such modest mediocrity was inconceivable. Almost he preferred the viciousness of Pietro. At least there was life, no matter how perverted; a fixed expression of that will which God had implanted in man to differentiate him from the brute. Hence he spoke not of Mosca, nor barely to him; his glance went indifferently over him and passed him by.

Little Andrea was a problem of a different sort. By all the rules Dante should have liked him. He was intelligent, delicately perceptive to impressions of music and the sweet new style. He was beautiful; more beautiful even than the stiff little angels that Cimabue was painting. But Dante didn't like him. There was something strange about those sleepy eyes that could widen to immense innocence. His pretty mouth was too red and curving. He peeped through the back parchment pages of the Ovid where Ser Brunetto had forbidden them to read. He submitted to the pettings of the master, who loved to rumple his fine ringlets and pinch his smooth, baby cheeks. That, too, disturbed Dante. He averted his eyes from such pleasantries and pretended to be deeply immersed in the text of his Virgil. He would berate himself for these spasms, for he loved Ser Brunetto; and whom he loved should be beloved of Dante. He lay awake at night trying to force himself at least

to like the boy. Was he jealous of the manifest attentions Ser Brunetto showered on Andrea, he asked? He answered himself honestly that he wasn't. He knew he, too, was secure in the affections of the old man. And he certainly did not wish to be petted and pinched and stroked. That would have been indecent in the case of a young man of his age. Yet the next day he averted his eyes as usual.

On the whole, however, Dante was intensely happy. A wide, new world opened to him under the tutelage of Ser Brunetto. He learned something of forms and contracts and the dry verbiage of the law. That was because his father wished it so. But chiefly he penetrated into the great Roman writers. Latin became as familiar to him as his native Tuscan tongue. He read in Ovid—parts of him—and studied Horace, the eloquence of Cicero, the *Thebaid* of Statius, and the *Pharsalia* of Lucan. Above all, he studied Virgil.

"Virgil," Ser Brunetto would say, "is the greatest of all poets. No one has lived, no one will ever live, that can compare with him. In his *Aeneid* there is comprized the profoundest thought of man, the noblest verse, the most divine inspiration. He was more than prophet, for did he not foretell the coming of Christ and the Universal Realm? Not even the Jewish prophets spoke as plainly as he did. What a pity," he sighed, "that he was not a Christian!"

"How could he be?" protested Dante. "Lord Jesus was not born on earth until after Virgil had died."

"True!" Ser Brunetto admitted, with another sigh. "Nevertheless he was a pagan and must expiate that error in Hell."

Dante was horrified. He had conned his Virgil until the fair copy had grown dog-eared and the melodious lines welled from his tongue like an ever-flowing spring.

"Why should he be damned?" he asked. "Before all others he lived a life of justice and virtue. Where is the justice that condemns him?"

"He died unbaptized and without faith."

"But you just said it was impossible for him to be baptized or to have faith."

Ser Brunetto took the boy's hand. "You must not argue questions like these, my Dante. Who are we to decide God's justice? Do not the Scriptures hold that such as Virgil are damned in Hell? And are they not our supreme authority, against which the puny might of human syllogisms must ever beat in vain?"

Dante desisted; but in his heart he was not satisfied. Virgil in Hell? Aristotle, the Philosopher, in Hell? Lucan, Homer, Plato? The man born on the banks of the Indus where there was none to speak of Christ, yet whose every act and inclination was good? Someday, somewhere, he decided, he would ask this question again.

CHAPTER IV

In these times the Guelf magnates of Florence—having rest from their wars without, with victory and honour, and fattening upon the goods of the exiled Ghibellines, and through other gains—by reason of pride and envy began to strive among themselves; whence arose in Florence many quarrels and enmities between the citizens, with death and wounds.

Villani's Chronicles

IN the month of February, 1279, all Florence took a holiday. The merchants of the calimala shut their warehouses and donned their finest ermine cloaks, the money-changers forgot for the while the jingle of coins, the apothecaries laid aside their pills, and the shoemakers their lasts; the great Mercato Vecchio blinked in unaccustomed desolation. The magistrates donned their best yellow surtouts and made certain the scarlet berets were tilted with proper gravity on their heads. The nobles surveyed their armour with regret and clad themselves in peaceful scarlet robes. Instead of swords ornate pouches, emblazoned with coats of arms, dangled from their belts. Peace was promised, but peace had been promised many times before, and they felt uneasy as they issued, thus naked and defenceless, into the streets.

This morning Dante, too, was freed from school and studies. He arose early, after a night of eager waiting for the dawn. He loved pageants and shows, and great, rolling speeches. There would be a surfeit of these. Cardinal Latino was renowned as an orator, but especially he wanted to hear the response of his master, Ser Brunetto Latini. With beating heart he prayed that Ser Brunetto's speech would far outshine the Cardinal's, and felt no sacrilege in the praying.

The household was in a turmoil. Alighiero called everywhere for his best black robe and his fine wool beret. His holiday pouch was mislaid, too, with the notarial seal upon it. Lapa, married now six months, scurried up and down stairs in vain attempt to fulfil his querulous demands, her buxom bulk already shapeless with child. Yet she found time to fling anxiously at her stepson: "Be sure to button your *pelliccia* closely to the neck, Dante. You'll be catching your death of cold out there on the piazza. Here is your cloak, Alighiero, just where you laid it. If you'll only wait I'll find your pouch, too. Holy Virgin, how can men be so sprawling with their things!"

"Don't worry about me, Mother," said Dante. "Hurry, Papa! The guilds are forming their processions. The banners are beginning to move."

"My beret, woman!" cried Alighiero, searching distractedly. "I just put it down on this chair."

"On the table, right behind you."

Alighiero snatched it up. "You shifted it. I *know* I placed it on the chair. Come, Dante."

As they hastened out of the house, Lapa set up a clamour. "Your shoes, Dante! Didn't I tell you to wear the boots instead of those thin, pointed shoes?"

But the noise of the street had already swallowed them up, and she shut the door to sink exhausted in a chair. "Holy Virgin, let them not take with colds. I know not which is the bigger baby, the young one or the old." The life within her stirred. "And let me be delivered of a boy," she added. "I vow six candles for a year if you do."

The Guild of Notaries, all in long, black garments, was forming in the square of San Martino. The great Guild banner, an azure field resplendent with a single golden star, whipped in the wind. Late-comers hastened from the neighbouring streets, sought their places in the line. Someone called to Alighiero. "Come next to me. We're ready to start."

The notary slid into place, gave his beret a pat to make certain it was on securely. Dante squeezed next to him. His youthful form was overshadowed by the paunchier, taller men. He forgot to button his *pelliccia*.

Up in front the banner rose higher, and the procession started. The bells of Florence began to sound. The humble bell of San Martino, the sweet bell of the Santa Maria Novella, the louder bells of the Baptistery and the Santa Reparata; but over all rose the great bell of the Badia, crying joyfully an end to riot and bloody domestic war. The sound lifted the boy's heart and made it beat in tune, so that he passed the house of Portinari and the facing stronghold of the Donati without even so much as a glance to right or left.

They swung into the Por San Piero and over to the outer walls of Florence. Through the open gate they went into the extended piazza of the Church of Santa Maria Novella. From other gates and other passages came the banners of the other Guilds.

The merchants of the calimala marched under a great red banner bearing a golden eagle perched on a large white globe. The money-changers bore likewise a red field, but it was spangled with golden florins as became their trade. The wool merchants carried a white sheep on their scarlet flag, while the apothecaries showed the Virgin Mary, Christ Child in her arms, against a vermilion ground.

Slowly, and with much confusion, the seven Greater Guilds took their respective positions to the front of the flagstoned square. Behind

them marched the five Lesser Guilds—brawny butchers, stone-workers, smiths, shoemakers, and retail hucksters. Far to the rear and scrambling along the sides for proper vantage points crowded the tumultuous humbler folk—artisans, apprentices, peasants, all agape.

Dante craned his neck, but couldn't see a thing. Broad backs and wide berets cut off his view. While his father was busy in converse he slipped away, squirmed through the massed ranks, and emerged upon the open piazza where cloths had been spread and no one was permitted to enter. A guard chased him back, and a portly judge in the first line, noting his distress, said good-humouredly: "Here, Dante, squeeze in by my side. How's your father?"

"He is well, thank you, Messer."

Then, forgetting the judge, forgetting father, he feasted his eyes on the scene. The Dominican Church of Santa Maria Novella was small and old, with the grey monastery stretching far behind into the open fields. The Dominicans had complained for many years that such humble quarters did not comport with the dignity of their Order, but nothing had been done about it until Cardinal Latino, himself a Dominican, came from Rome to compose the everlasting trouble. He graciously consented to bless the site of a new and lordlier edifice for his brother friars and pronounced a benediction over the first stone. It stood there, grey, granitic, solitary, waiting for its fellows to rise in massive composition all around.

Before the door of the old church wooden scaffolds had been erected for the occasion. The Cardinal occupied the seat of honour. His red hat and ecclesiastical robes made a fair show. Behind him sat the monks and clergy of Florence. Beside him, very stiff and solemn, sat the Podestà—the chief magistrate of the town and a foreigner, as was the law. The Gonfalonier, or Standard-Bearer, and the Captain of the People, who led them to war, were next. They were great officials. The Council of Three Hundred occupied the remainder of the seats. They were chosen by the Guilds and were chiefly solid citizens, rich from trade and ready to try their new-found strength against nobles, Empire, Pope—yea, even all the world.

The dress of the dignitaries proclaimed their wealth and their pretensions. Everything was heavy with gold. Their fur-trimmed cloaks were scarlet and gold; their red *cappucci* had miniver facings laced with gold. Their stockings were scarlet and their shiny boots were almost hidden under an embroidery of gold. Sapphires and diamonds dazzled the sight. But for the Podestà and Gonfalonier these gems were too common. A priceless pearl of purest lustre gleamed solitary in their hats, and their robes were spangled with golden stars.

Barely had Dante settled himself by the kindly judge when the

nobles of Florence marched across the cloth-covered piazza. They came in three bands and took three separate stations, eyeing each other with suspicious glances, seeking instinctively for the swords they had been compelled to leave behind.

The humblest, saddest group were the Ghibellines. Long years of poverty and exile had quieted their pride and arrogance. They sought only to return to their native city on what terms they could. But the other two groups were both Guelfs. Victory had been too much for them; so had a common possession of the spoils. Since there were no more Ghibellines left in Florence to fight, they fought each other. Once more the familiar, terrible cry of *Accor 'uomo!* (*Help, comrade!*) resounded through the streets. Once more the crossbow bolts shot thick and fast from the tower fortresses of the nobles, and armed men hacked and hewed with swords down the narrow ways. The house of Adimari led one faction, the powerful Donati clan the other.

In desperation the Florentines called upon the Pope to intervene and halt this senseless warfare. There had been a decent excuse for the original strife between Guelf and Ghibelline; there was none between Guelf and Guelf but envy and mad ambition.

Now it happened that this plea from the turbulent town fell in neatly with the plans of Nicholas III. He meditated a new Crusade against the infidel, and for that he required peace and unity in Christian Europe. Florence was the focal point of all disorder. If he could bring about a final settlement of all disputes, the Crusade would be successful. But to do so necessitated a composition with the Ghibellines as well. As long as they remained scattered over all Italy, stirring up trouble, plotting against the city that had cast them out, there would be incessant war. Either they found allies to attack Florence, or Florence moved against the towns that harboured them. It was true that his predecessor, Pope Gregory X, had tried to bring about a reconciliation and failed. In hot anger Gregory had laid the purse-proud town under the interdict. But Nicholas felt he would not fail. The times were ripe, and the Florentines had come to *him*.

His thoughts moved back over a century and a half of dispute. They had been bitter years, and there had seemed times when the Papacy was lost in its tremendous struggle with the Empire. There had been times when the great German Emperors, Frederick Barbarossa and Frederick II, who was without doubt an utter infidel, held the Popes almost prisoners within the narrow confines of the Roman walls. But always, when things were blackest, God had intervened to upset the plans of these blasphemous men. Hadn't Barbarossa died upon Crusade? Wasn't the second Frederick stricken suddenly in the midst of grandiose schemes? Hadn't Manfred, defying the excommunicatory

thunders of the Church, been slain in battle on the plains of Benevento by an inferior force, armed only in the righteousness of its cause?

Nicholas fingered his cross. Well, it was over now. The Empire was defeated, withdrawn to its German base. The power in Italy resided safely in Papal hands—*his* hands. Charles of Anjou, whom former Popes had called to Italy to aid against the Empire, was loyal. Why shouldn't he be? From a penniless Duke he had risen to the Kingdom of Sicily and Apulia, and half of Tuscany gave him nominal service.

His thoughts returned to the present. The divided Guelfs of Florence. The Ghibellines. He would show his magnanimity. Even the Ghibellines would be grateful. The Ghibellines had been the supporters of Empire, yet he would force the Guelfs of Florence to restore them to their homes. The Guelfs had fought for the Papacy; but sometimes he wondered whether their support had not been predicated more on local feuds and advantages than on devotion to the Church. Well, it didn't matter any more. They had served their purpose. God, in His infinite wisdom, had seen fit to use them for the benefit of His Holy Church. He muttered a prayer and ordered Frate Latino, his beloved nephew, whom he had recently made a Cardinal, to be sent to him.

Dante's feet were getting cold. The sun shone, but it did not warm. Too late he remembered his stepmother's exhortation to wear his heavy boots. She was a good woman, he thought, and tried hard to be like a real mother to him. He wiped a tear from his eye with the back of his fist. It was about a year now since—since . . . He buttoned his *pelliccia* tightly to his neck. He wished they'd begin soon.

At last the marching and the gathering were complete. A great sigh went up from the people. The Cardinal rose. Everyone strained forward. He made a fine figure; tall, elegant, assured. With a graceful gesture he began to speak.

It was a good speech, in the best traditions of the rhetoricians, filled with happy turns of phrase and sprinkled with apt citations from the Fathers.

He recounted the sad history of events. He spoke of the mad ambition of the Emperors and their utter defeat. He spoke touchingly of the days when all Italy was an armed camp, city against city, and citizen against citizen. But the good people of Florence knew all that better than he. Hadn't their fair town been torn asunder? First the Ghibellines had won control; then the Guelfs; then the Ghibellines again; and again the Guelfs. And now, when all seemed over, the Guelfs had taken to quarrelling among themselves.

His Holiness, the Pope, was grieved over the unhappy state of his favourite city—yes, grieved to the point of tears. For was he not the

shepherd of his people, the comforter of his flock? In the goodness of his heart he had sent him, Cardinal Latino, as his unworthy instrument to bring the blessings of peace to them. Yes, even to the Ghibellines who, in times past, had lifted blasphemous hands against the Church. But His Holiness forgave them, even as Jesus Christ had forgiven in a similar case.

He turned to the huddled group of Ghibellines. He hoped, he said, they had learned their lesson in the long years of banishment. He hoped they would never again forget their Christian duty of submission.

He turned to the two scowling groups of Guelfs, and embraced them both with a delicate sweep of his wrist. They had been the faithful champions of the Church. Would they now spoil those years of service by fighting each other as though they were Saracens? Did they not realize the profound sorrow they caused the Holy Father by this unseemly dissension?

He turned to the seated dignitaries of Florence. He commended their city; it was one of the brightest ornaments of the Church. He spoke of their wealth, their far-flung trade, their spirit and independence. But they must not be too independent, he reminded them; for independence leads to pride; and pride is one of the Seven Deadly Sins. Humility, my children, is the chief virtue; and obedience to those whom God, in His Wisdom, has placed over you.

He spread his hands over the multitude and blessed them. The people kneeled for the blessing and there were tears in their eyes. It had been a wonderful speech. The castigations had been soft and the praise abundant.

Dante kneeled with the rest. The ground was hard and cold to his knees, but he pressed them down until they hurt. It was small enough penance. For hadn't the Cardinal spoken directly to him? He was proud, and joyed in his pride. He thought himself wiser than his fellows, nimbler-witted. He had no mercy for their errors and stupidities. *The deadly sin!* Then and there he resolved to mend his ways and cultivate humility. Yes, he would start at once with Mosca, his timorous, plodding schoolmate. Tomorrow he would ask Mosca his opinion on a certain difficult passage in the *Ethics*. Naturally he knew the proper explication of that passage far better than Mosca would ever know; but he would listen to him humbly and respectfully just the same, and thank him for his answer.

And now he rose with the rest and waited for the response. Ser Brunetto Latini had been scheduled to make the reply in the name of Florence. No one else could speak with such resonance and oratorical flights as he. Florence was proud of him. His learning was immense, as anyone might know who had read his *Tresor*—that vast repository of

all human knowledge. For every quotation that the Cardinal had made from the Fathers he could match one from the classic Romans. For every citation from a Decretal Ser Brunetto would be sure to counter with one from Aristotle. The people sighed in anticipation. It would be like a tournament—champion against champion. A friendly tilt, indeed; but a tilting nevertheless.

Dante trembled with excitement. The Cardinal had proved himself a most accomplished orator. Wasn't his own penitence an example of his powers? Would his beloved teacher suffer from such swift comparison? He couldn't abide it if he did. He told himself loyally that it was impossible. He knew that Ser Brunetto had laboured on his speech for many days, smoothing each rough edge, polishing each syllable. The Cardinal had been excellent, but Ser Brunetto would be far better.

He craned his neck. Where was he? Why didn't he rise? The people began to cough and shuffle. There seemed to be something amiss on the platform; a turning of heads towards the entrance to the church, a hurried whispering. The shuffling and murmuring on the ground grew louder.

The Podestà rose slowly. "I am sorry to announce, good citizens of Florence, that Ser Brunetto Latini has not yet arrived. I do not know—it may be an indisposition—slight, no doubt—perhaps he will come later—but . . ." The Podestà was not a speaker. It embarrassed him to address large audiences. "So, if the noble Cardinal will excuse us for the failure to respond—I assure him it was all prepared—we mean no discourtesy—I mean——"

The Cardinal put a halt to his stammering with smooth words. "I assure you, Messer Podestà, I never dreamed of taking offence. I know Ser Brunetto well. His fame is well established, and I am certain his response would have cast my poor efforts into darkness. I sincerely hope that his indisposition is, as you say, trifling. Now, if I have your permission, Messer, shall we go on with the kiss of peace and the signing of the proper documents?"

"Of a surety! Of a surety!" the Podestà exclaimed joyfully. He had been mortally afraid the Council might have thought it incumbent on *him* to make some sort of response. He wiped his brow as he sat down. But where the devil *was* Ser Brunetto? he grumbled.

Dante didn't wait to hear any more. The stammered words of the Podestà rang like tocsins in his brain. Ser Brunetto ill? So ill that he failed to attend a solemn assemblage like this? It must have come on him suddenly; yesterday he had been hale enough. Panic invaded him. Ser Brunetto was an old man, and old men had a habit of dying suddenly, without previous warning.

Eyelids twisted tight to keep himself from crying, he turned and

slipped through the close-formed ranks. The merchants of the calimala shoved back angrily at his squirming flight; the apothecaries jeered and wanted to know if he had taken a pill too many that morning. As he passed the notaries his father caught a glimpse of him.

"Hey, there, Dante!" he cried. "What manner of goings-on are these? First you disappear when my back is turned; now you run as though a hundred devils follow you. Don't you want to witness the reconciliation? You were hot enough about it all week."

The boy pretended he didn't hear and kept on running. To the devil with the ceremony! It would be solemn and impressive enough, no doubt. First the two factions of the Guelfs would come forward and publicly kiss each other. Then, once more united, they would march with measured tread half-way across the piazza. The Ghibellines would similarly advance. The ancient enemies would embrace—grim warriors who had slain each other's kin and stolen each other's worldly goods! Then the Cardinal would bring forth the contracts for them to sign, and order them to give sureties for the proper keeping of the peace. The people would raise a mighty shout and press forward, demanding that marriage contracts be entered into forthwith between the erstwhile warring families—an Adimari daughter with a Donati son; a Pazzi son with an Uberti daughter. Thereby they thought, vainly, to bring about what mere oaths and kisses had usually failed to do. Who knew? Perhaps on the morrow Dante would discover that his former playmate, Bicci Donati, now a grown man of sixteen and inclined to stoutness, was suddenly married with a strange wife, politically thrust upon him.

But these things were mere quick passages in his mind, as he ran through the gate and pell-mell through the streets. The town was deserted. Everyone who could walk or hobble had gone to see the show. His feet echoed loudly on the stones and the sound rebounded from the overhanging eaves. His dear, kind teacher! God! he prayed, let me find him only ill—a trifling illness! Dear God, let me not find him dead!

He turned a corner and flew towards the modest house of the master. The street was empty, dead. The door was blank, quiet. He pounded on it with fierce fists. No one came. The servants must have gone to the Santa Maria Novella. He remembered now. Ser Brunetto had graciously given them a chance to hear his response. The response that had not been made! Fear pounded in every vein. Then the master was alone, choking for breath, dying, with no one to ease his agony.

He tried the door. It opened. The servants had forgotten to bar it when they went out. Inside the house was silent. Like the silence of the grave, thought Dante, and trembled in every limb. He ran to the

room where their lessons were heard of mornings. It was empty. On the table, next to the *Tresor*, lay a pile of manuscript, neatly arranged. It was the speech Ser Brunetto had intended to make. The trembling became a palsy. Then he was still in the house; this house that was now so dark and ominous.

The boy ran through the rooms, his thin soles whispering as he ran, as though they did not wish to disturb the peace of the already dead. The rooms held no life.

Dante had never been on the second story. There were the bed-chambers. His pace was slow as he trod the narrow boards, half-consciously on tiptoe. The darkness of the upper hall bewildered him. He paused a moment indecisively.

Then he heard a faint murmuring, a queer intake of breath, a movement as of someone tossing and struggling in his bed. With a cry Dante rushed to the door through which it came and flung it open.

He blinked a moment against the light. In the farther corner, under the slanting roof, was a bed. He stared at it. His eyes went wide with unbelief, then filled with sudden horror. A curious sound issued from his throat. He turned blindly to flee.

"Jesu!" cried Ser Brunetto and jumped up from the bed, all naked as he was. Fear gave his aged limbs the strength to move more swiftly than his youthful scholar. He caught him by the arm as he was stumbling back into the hall, and held him in a grip of iron bands.

"You have seen, my Dante? You have seen?" His voice was hoarse and ragged; all the noble resonance that had made it famous was gone. His white beard hung in disorder over his yellowed, wrinkled chest. It was cold in the hall, but his shivering did not come from the cold. Drops of water started on the baldness of his brow and trickled slowly down.

The boy nodded dumbly. He could not speak. He would never be able to speak again.

"You saw who it was?"

He nodded again and averted his blinded eyes. Would he ever forget? In his dreams he would see little Andrea's golden ringlets spread upon the whiteness of the sheet, the sleepy eyes, the red, parted lips, the white lines of his childish body.

"Jesu!" said Ser Brunetto again. He fell to quaking. The cold bit into him; and a deeper cold. At length he said: "Promise me you will not go until I explain. Let me dress, Dante. I beg of you, let me dress before I catch my death of cold. Promise me to wait."

"I promise," said Dante. It was hard to speak, but the words somehow came. His master, his teacher, was imploring him, almost grovelling before him. How could he do otherwise than promise?

"Ha!" said Ser Brunetto. He loosed his hold. "Wait for me downstairs in the study. For the sake of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, and the Virgin Mary, do not go!" Then he stumbled inside and shut the door.

Dante went slowly down the stairs, hand pressed against the wall to keep himself from falling. There was a void inside of him and a strange, rattling noise that was his heart. He was colder than Ser Brunetto. He went to the study and sat down before the table. He pressed his temples with his knuckles, hoping for the sharp awareness of pain. He felt nothing. He tried to think—even of Ser Brunetto. But his brain was a dull and useless lump.

He did not know how long he had sat thus when Ser Brunetto came in. He was decently clad and like his usual self again. His brow was clear and his beard carefully combed. Only in his eyes was there still a lurking terror.

He put his hand gently on the bowed head of the boy. Dante didn't stir.

"I know this has been a shock to you, Dante mine," he said. "But you are an intelligent lad and my favourite pupil. I want you to listen to me quietly."

The boy didn't look up.

The old man took a deep breath. "I am a sinner, Dante," he said softly. "A strange and terrible sinner. I don't seek to excuse myself before you. I seek no forgiveness; only understanding. God, who sees into the twisted turnings of the wretched human heart, knows what I've been through because of this. It is a weakness of the flesh—a loathsome weakness, perhaps. But I am an old man, past the years of normal ways, and temptation is constantly before me." He sighed. "Nor is it any excuse to say that I am not alone. But, do you remember Socrates? Have you forgotten the noble Caesar? How about the great Priscian, a grammarian like myself?"

Still the boy did not speak or lift his head.

Ser Brunetto grew desperate. "You are a lad grown beyond your years, Dante. I never had such a pupil like you before; swift to grasp, tenacious to retain. Did you know that I had cast your horoscope? If I read it right—and you know I have some skill in the art—you cannot fail of a glorious haven if only you follow your star."

Dante pressed his head deeper into his hands. Ser Brunetto thought rapidly. "I am wholly in your hands," he said. "If you say one word of what you have seen I am a ruined man indeed. All the work of my life, the books on which I toiled, the fame I have builded, will be swept away like snow in a spring freshet. Respect will turn to mockery; obedience to foul abuse. I am an old man, Dante, destined soon to a

judgment more terrible than any on earth. If I am judged by men as well, because of you——"

The boy sprang up, "Do you think," he cried in a choked, passionate voice, "that I will say anything? Do you believe I am so vile as to betray the honoured teacher who has taught me all I know? No, Ser Brunetto! As long as I live my tongue shall speak only gratitude and my head be bowed in reverence. Now may I go?"

The face of the old man cleared. "You are a pearl without price, Dante mine," he said joyfully. "You need say no more. But—how comes it you first came to my house before going to the reconciliation? You and I had better hurry now if we are not to miss it." He smiled wanly. "I have a speech, you know."

Dante stared incredulously. "The kiss of peace has already been given. Your name was called and you didn't appear. That was why I came."

"Jesu!" said the old man again. "I didn't know it was so late. I am, indeed, a wretched sinner. My poor little response, that I polished so tenderly!"

"May I go, Master?" repeated the boy.

"Go in peace, Dante."

As the boy went out of the door, he called after him. "Tomorrow, little scholar, we start on the proof of God in the first book of Thomas of Aquino. It is a beautiful example of reasoning."

The shoulders of the boy sagged drearily as he walked away. He didn't turn.

Ser Brunetto sighed. His face twisted. Then, still sighing, he climbed slowly up the stairs towards his bedroom.

Lapa opened the door. "Why, Dante!" she exclaimed. "Home so soon and alone? Where is your father?"

Dante dragged himself inside. Lapa took a good look at him. "Holy Virgin!" she cried, alarmed. "You're shivering and your face is pale and terrible as if you'd seen the Evil One himself." She crossed herself. "Are you ill?"

"I'm all right, Mother," he whispered. Without another word he pulled himself up the flight of stairs and fell headlong, dressed as he was, across the bed.

Lapa hurried after him. She found him in a fever. His eyes were glassy and he muttered to himself. By main effort she undressed the shaking boy and covered him with blankets. She bustled with warm drinks and healing potions, but he refused to touch a thing. "Let me alone!" he cried, shielding his face against the wall. "I want nothing."

In great fright she thrust a mantle over herself and ran out for a

physician. He came just as Alighiero, frowning with anger, entered the house.

"Where is that wretched boy?" he demanded. "He acted like a very madman in front of all the guilds. I swear I didn't know which way to turn for shame."

"Hush, Alighiero!" said Lapa. "He is in a fever. I just went for the physician."

"Ill? Ha! He did not look ill, indeed. What a day! Ser Brunetto is said to be home also with some ailment. I hope the plague hasn't come to Florence."

"I've seen no signs of it," said the physician. "It's too cold yet for the plague. But let me see the lad."

Dante shook and cried out when the doctor would have examined him. The doctor put on a portentous air.

"Do you think there is peril in it?" asked Lapa anxiously. Alighiero stood by, silent with worry.

The doctor looked solemn. "It is too early to tell. But his blood is thick and congested. He must be bled at once. Get me a basin."

Dante sat upright. He glared at the physician "I will not be bled. Go away, all of you!"

"Ha! That is a dangerous sign. The blood is all in his head. Quick with the basin!"

Lapa put her soft fingers on the boy's forehead, smoothed it gently. "There, there, Dantino! Just you go to sleep. No one will bleed you."

"Ha!" snorted the doctor again. "Do you think, woman, you know more than a duly licensed graduate of Padua?"

She said decisively. "I know only the boy does not wish to be bled. Please go!"

Alighiero stared at his wife. Was he perchance wedded to a termagant? His first wife, Bella, had never dared speak like that. Yet it must be taken into consideration that she was big with child, and women have been known to do queer things in that condition.

As the affronted physician stalked down the stairs Dante turned flushed face towards his stepmother, whispered, "Thank you, Mama!" and fell asleep.

She stood a moment watching his quick breathing. Her face worked. It was the first time he had called her *mama*, instead of the more formal *mother*. Then she, too, went downstairs.

Dante had a vision in his sleep. There hadn't been many of them of late. His studies had fully occupied the restless fantasies of his mind. But this one was more real and terrible than any he had ever had.

He stood on the edge of a plain. The ground of it was sand, dry and

thick, and no plants lived in its waste. Behind him was a wood, where the trees were gnarled and warped and flung up their branches in the semblance of men in agony. Dreadful wails stirred hoarsely through the leaves. But the plain was more dreadful than the wood. Upon its sands were herds of naked men who moaned and moved about in search of surcease from their pain. From a brazen sky fell flakes of fire, slowly and without haste, like fleecy snow that drops gently on a day when there is no wind. The sand beneath was kindled from the heat, and glowed like the interior of an oven. The naked men lifted burning soles, then set one down in haste to lift the other. Their hands brushed ceaselessly over all their forms, trying in vain to rid themselves of the flakes that fell and fell.

A naked wretch, whose beard was all aflame, stumbled towards Dante. He lifted his face, scorched and baked to ochre. He lifted his arms, imploring, "Don't you know me, little scholar?"

Behind the boy there rose a voice, crying, "Behold the Sodomites and the sinners against Nature!"

There was a clap of thunder and Dante awoke, bathed in sweat and very cold.

In the morning he was well, but pale.

"Do you think you're strong enough to go to school?" asked his father.

"I am not going back to Ser Brunetto," he said. "I wish to go to the Minorite School of Santa Croce."

Alighiero held his head in amazement. "Has the fever addled your wits?" he demanded. "But a day ago there was no one in all the world like Ser Brunetto. Now——"

"Please don't question me, Father. Let me go to the Minorites."

The notary looked keenly at his son. He was quite pale and quite determined. "Have it your own way, then," he surrendered. "But if there is any more nonsense——"

"Thank you, Papa."

CHAPTER V

*My lady looks so genile and so pure
When yielding salutation by the way,
That the tongue trembles and has naught to say,
And the eyes, which fain would see, may not endure.*

La Vita Nuova

THE night had not yet paled from out the sky when Dante arose. Moving silently so as not to wake the sleeping household he groped his way to the window and flung it open. It was the morn of May and the fresh breeze felt cool upon his restless face. He leaned out and let the sight of Florence seep into his unquiet soul. The calm stars drenched the sleeping city in a bath of beauty: The great towers were softened and the Badia was touched with ghostly radiance. Its bell hung motionless and dark, waiting for the dawn to wake all Florence with its matin song. The burghers lay snug by their wives, dreaming of profits and the market-place. The nobles, Guelf and Ghibelline alike, muttered in their sleep, chafing at the enforced peace the Pope had placed upon them, and uneasy at the growing power of the burghers.

Dante let the wind ruffle his fine, dark hair and the darker texture of his thoughts. In a few days he would be eighteen. He was a man. Yet what had he accomplished? He remembered the proud hopes and high resolves of the boy of nine, the lad of thirteen. He smiled bitterly at the face of the night. He remembered the day when he had stood up to his father and declared he would be a poet. His father was dead now; dead eight months. He hadn't lived to see him poet—or anything. His father had shaken his head many a time at the idle pastimes of his son. Why wasn't he, he inquired again and again, sometimes in sorrow and sometimes in anger, like the sons of other respectable men he could name? By this time he could have been a notary, with an eye out for an eventual seat among the magistrates. Or he could have finished an apprenticeship to some prosperous merchant. Or even gone to Padua to become a physician. But no, *his* son wished to be a poet! And to be a poet, forsooth, meant to loiter in the streets by day and by night, to walk the countryside and listen to the birds and examine each silly blade of grass, to play upon the lute and draw the heads of angels who looked suspiciously like the young daughters of his neighbours, to scribble furiously all night and tear up the scribbling just as furiously in the morning. Did Dante think his father was made of money, that he could support him in such idleness?

Perhaps his father had been right. He had written and written; and the results had been lame and wretched rhymes that would have excited the laughter of Guinizelli and the scorn of every scribbling hack. The ideas that came to him were the ideas of other men; the lines he wrote were still-born at their birth.

His father was dead now. He didn't feel the loss as he had felt the loss of his mother. Already his image was fading from his mind, as colourless in death as it had been in life. He hadn't left very much to his family. The house in Florence, the vineyards and orchards across the Ponte Vecchio, which he had finally succeeded in gaining from the Ghibelline spoil, certain small sums of money. He had had ill-luck in lending out money at interest.

Luckily Lapa's dowry was still intact. They would get along. Dante's face softened at the thought of his stepmother and her three children. True to the promise of her hips and ample bosom she had been richly fertile—a boy, Francesco, and two girls, Tana and Caterina, followed in swift succession. They were pretty little things, laughing and clutching with baby fists at their big stepbrother. Yet Lapa, for all of her own, looked after her husband's son with eyes of affection. He was a good boy, she thought, and Alighiero had no right to nag him so.

The eastern sky was beginning to pale. The pure sapphire lightened and the orange sun lifted its rim across the distant roofs. A lark startled the silence with soaring song. The Badia began to peal, and the other churches took up the loud refrain. Windows opened; doors banged. A cart rumbled noisily over the wooden Ponte Rubaconte. Beneath, in the second story, Caterina set up a wail. He could hear Lapa hushing her. Then there was a suckling noise as Lapa gave her the breast. The day of May had arrived.

Dante dressed. His thoughts were a burden of many things. Nine years ago, on such a day of May, he had attended the feast of Folco Portinari and met his Beatrice in a strange new guise. How the life in him had stopped; then rushed tumultuously anew! He smiled a little at the memory. For years he had dogged the house in which she lived; and gaped and mooned after her in the streets as though the little girl were divinity itself. When Beatrice stopped to speak to him, as she had used to do before that day, he would flush, stammer, and flee incontinently, letting her stand with puzzled frown and wonder in her eyes.

This lasted until his fourteenth year. When he quit the morning school of Ser Brunetto and went all day to the Minorites, there was no time to dawdle and dream. The face and figure of the little girl faded and joined a long procession of childish things. The old Franciscan monks were good teachers, and but little given to the rod. They taught him the quadrivium, and the elements of the trivium. He learned

astronomy; the names of Ptolemy and the Arabian, Alfraganus. He studied St. Augustine and heard of Plato. He didn't like the eloquent saint too well; he preferred the bare, stripped reasoning of Thomas of Aquino. But the worthy mentors looked askance at Thomas and did not reach his *Summas*. Was not Thomas a Dominican and his doctrine suspect? At such times Dante regretted his old teacher. To Ser Brunetto all doctrine was worthy of respect, all learning valid. Soon after that terrible day he had abandoned his school and devoted himself to public affairs. Everyone spoke of him as a man of mark. Mosca apprenticed to a silk merchant and Andrea remained at home, sleepy-eyed and red-mouthed. Dante saw neither of them any more. Which was just as well.

The young man sat down again at his table and stared at the lines he had written by candle the night before. Were ever lines so limp or void of any thought? He tore them across, then tore them lengthwise into little strips. The harsh, crackling sound ripped at his nerves. With a groan he went downstairs.

Lapa held the baby, Caterina, in her arms. Tana crawled happily on the floor. The boy, Francesco, set up a yelp at the sight of his adored big brother, "Play! Play!" he clamoured. "Wanta play!"

"For shame, child!" scolded Lapa. "Can't you let Dante break his fast before you fall on him like a little animal?" She placed the baby in her crib and began to bustle food upon the table.

"You were up half the night, Dantino," she said, placing a huge, crisp loaf before him and a platter of cold meat. "I heard you stirring about."

"Yes, Mother." He glanced moodily at the plate. He had no appetite.

"You had better eat," she urged. "You've been losing weight."

"I'm all right."

Lapa looked at him and looked away. There were dark patches underneath his eyes. His face had lost its former delicate colouring. Was it love? she wondered anxiously. He was a handsome enough young man, with those fine brows, that long, aristocratic nose, and sweetly tender face. Any sensible girl would be a fool to let him languish too long unappeased. Yet she had heard of no girls. In fact, he seemed to avoid them. He even avoided his old boy friends, Manetto Portinari and Forese Donati. Manetto was a good sort, but Forese—they called him Bicci, didn't they?—for all his great family was pretty much of a waster and glutton. If he didn't look out he'd soon be so fat they'd have to trundle him around in a cart.

It must be his poetry, then. She knew very little about poetry. For that matter all black marks upon paper were a mystery to her. But if

her stepson wanted to write poetry, why should she attempt to say him nay? Only . . .

"You've been cooped up too much of late, Dante," she said. "It's May day. All the young men and all the young girls are out in the streets, parading and laughing. Why don't you go out? The fresh air will do you good."

He might as well, he thought. The idea of returning to his cramped room, with its dim light and its stuffiness, filled him with a sudden distaste. The memory of innumerable canzones, started and discarded, were ghosts to haunt that chamber forever. He was through with poetry, he cried. He would go out and be a young man again, and to the devil with all rhyme schemes! He had it! He'd hunt up good old Bicci and they'd have a grand carouse together. He usually ate sparingly and he wasn't fond of wine. But this time . . .

"You're right, Mother," he said. "The May air *will* do me good." He placed his fine white cap with the brown facings on his head. The peaked top folded over and fell gracefully back upon his shoulders. Since it was warm he left off his long black surcoat. He went out.

The sky was a dazzling blue. The air was sweet and clean. Women stood in their doorways and gossiped across to each other. Laughter and the sound of music strained through the narrow streets. All Florence seemed in motion.

He paused a moment and sniffed the air. What a fool he had been! For months now he had been barely alive. To the devil with all bleak studies and silly poetry! Nine years ago, to the very day, he had stood on this same spot and tugged his father eagerly towards the Portinari. On that day, he thought bitterly, he had turned his back on life. The new life, indeed! Death in life, rather. And all because of a little girl whom his overstrained imagination had conjured into one of heaven's angels! Angel? She was merely an ordinary girl, like any other girl in Florence. This was what came of his visions and fantasies. Praise be, he hadn't had a vision since the dreadful one of Ser Brunetto that broke his fever. He wanted no more of them. They addled his brain.

Which way should he turn? Out through the great gate and across the Arno to the pleasant meadows where a Court of Love no doubt would be in progress? No; he had enough of them, too. Ah, yes, Bicci. With a determined air he started up the street.

He hadn't seen Bicci for quite a while. So much the more reason for looking him up. Bicci, they said, was no credit to the Donati. Though his elder brother, Corso, was one of the chiefest and most powerful nobles in Florence, Bicci was content to eat his substance and drink the good red wine. Yet what was fame and power? He, Dante, had reached for the heights and what had it got him? A hollow face

and the beginning of a stoop to his shoulders. And Bicci's sister, Piccarda? There was quite a story about her. Corso had caused her to be betrothed to Rossellino della Tosa. It was a political alliance, for della Tosa was years older than the maid of seventeen, and ugly to boot. Piccarda, to escape the marriage, entered the convent of Santa Clara and took the vows. When Corso heard of it he flew into one of his famous rages, mounted his retainers, and spurred, armed and accoutered into the holy precincts. Against the protests of the nuns, against the tears and cries of his sister, he tore the habit from her back, thrust her on horseback and brought her, dishevelled and lamenting, to the altar, where Rossellino waited, black-browed, grim, for the consummation of the ceremony.

The affair had caused a mighty scandal in Florence. There was talk of excommunication, of stern secular measures. But Corso Donati laughed all threats to scorn, and went his way. He was above the law, above even an insulted Church. Poor Piccarda! thought Dante. She had been a meek, sweet child.

Immersed in these thoughts he hurried along the street to the stronghold of the Donati. Three ladies were walking slowly towards him. The centre one seemed youthful to his abstracted gaze. Her flowing dress was purest white. The flanking ladies were older, and their garments were of darker hue, as became their age.

Since the way was narrow Dante moved to the wall to let them pass.

The girl in the middle whispered something to her companions. They stopped.

"Greetings to Dante Alighieri!" she said, in a soft, clear voice. "It is a long time since I have seen you. Why do you hold yourself so strange?"

Dante started. He stared at the speaker. His heart began to beat and thump as it hadn't done since he was nine years old. Was this—could this be . . . ?

"Beatrice!" he whispered. "Donna Beatrice!"

He hadn't expected her to be like this. It was almost four years! She had grown tall, yet not too tall. The child, the slender, unformed girl had become a maiden. Her hair was free to the sun-swept air. It gleamed inexpressibly bright, like the gold-leaf halo Cimabue placed so lovingly about the head of his Madonna. Her face was pure and oval, of a purity that put to shame the whiteness of her robe.

Her eyes, like the immeasurable sea, were fixed upon him. Her lips half-parted in a smile.

"Who else but Beatrice!" Her face took on a reminiscent glow. "Do you remember when we were children, on just such a May day as this, you chose me Queen? I have never forgotten it, Dante. You, no doubt, have."

All his being rose in protest. *He* forget? Would he ever forget that tremulous moment when all the glories of Heaven opened to his eyes? Would he ever forget *this* moment when God vouchsafed him yet another chance? What a blind fool he had been through the intervening years! He opened his mouth to speak, and stood agape. The memory of his thoughts barely a moment before rose to torment him. He was unworthy! He had been unfaithful to her in his mind; he had dismissed her from his dreams as he might have dismissed any common girl of common flesh. An angel had deigned to visit him and he had turned away. Vile, sinful wretch that he was, unfit to touch the earth on which she walked! Words rose in his throat and choked. Abashed, not daring to gaze upon the glory of her face again, he bowed his head.

The elder ladies looked at each other and smiled significantly. Beatrice noted the look and the bowed head of Dante. With a sudden gesture she saluted him and walked on. She could not trust herself to speak.

Dante lifted his head as one does when the too-bright sun departs behind a cloud. The vision was gone, but the tremble of its glory lingered in the air.

His limbs trembled in unison. He felt faint. Forgotten was the pride, the violence of his earlier renunciation. The thought of Bicci, and his meditated carouse, filled him with infinite horror. He turned around and went home, staggering a little as one does who has drunk too much.

Lapa was busy with her children and her household cares. She was surprised to see him.

"Why, Dante," she exclaimed. "You only just went out. Is there anything wrong?"

He went past her and up the stairs without reply. He fell upon his bed. It was barely time. For the walls of his room instantly expanded.

A fiery mist filled all the space. A man of superhuman aspect descended through the mist and clothed himself in its blazing folds. He said to Dante, "I am thy Master!" and his voice was terrible and strange. In his arms he held a sleeping girl, whose beauty was so great it made the mist to glow beyond its former hue. Her form was covered with a blood-red cloth. Dante knew at once that this was Beatrice. In his hand, that also held his burden, the Master held a small and flaming thing. It pulsed and leaped as though it were alive. It burned with a great heat and quivered in its burning. "Behold," he said, "thy heart!"

Dante stared at the strange and glowing thing and clapped his own hand to his bosom. There was no sound or beat. Within his breast there was a void.

The Lord of flame looked down upon his sleeping burden. He awakened

her and offered her the burning heart. She gazed on it with fright and would have refused it. He offered it again with an imperious gesture. This time she took it and ate it with many a mouth of shuddering distaste.

At first he was glad to see her eat, and encouraged her to the deed. But when she had finished his joy turned suddenly to bitter tears. His face convulsed like the face of one who had done an evil thing, and drops of blood-red hue fell on the cloth that covered her. Still weeping he gathered Beatrice in his arms and rose along a fiery path towards heaven.

Dante heard a loud outcry. It was his own. He sprang up from his bed and stared around. The room was dark and the patch of window showed a thin, horned moon. It was night.

Like one who moves under a compulsion not his own, he lit a candle. He sat down before his table and began to write. The lines flowed smoothly and without a flaw.

*To every heart which the sweet pain doth move,
And unto which these words may now be brought
For true interpretation and kind thought,
Be greeting in our Lord's name, which is Love.*

When he had finished the sonnet which recounted his vision, he read it over. It was good. Nay, it was more than good. Guinizelli had written nothing so fine; nor had Cavalcanti nor any of the other new propounders of the sweet new style in Italy. In far Provence they had not done as well.

Yet he felt no exultation. The sonnet was not his, he was the instrument through which it came to paper. It was Beatrice who was the sole creator.

By the time he had finished the morning star glowed in the east. He felt no lack of sleep. A curious lightness filled him, and a wonder at what the vision portended. He sat there a while and mused.

What should he do with this sonnet he had made? Within its lines, he knew, lay the key to the mystery. Yet who might resolve it for him? Guinizelli, alas, was dead. He thought of Guido Cavalcanti, the Florentine. He was older than Dante and came of a noble and wealthy family. He had been the first in Florence to practice the sweet new style, and already his poems were hailed as surpassing in power and loveliness the songs of Guinizelli, the master. But Dante didn't know Cavalcanti and there were those who spoke of him as arrogant and aloof from his fellows.

Dante reread his sonnet. It bore rereading. Carefully writing in his finest hand, making each letter thin, long and perfectly proportioned, he made a copy. Then he made more copies. One for Cino of Pistoia;

another for Dante da Maiano, whose name was like his own. These were young poets like himself, yet whose reputation was already established.

When he had finished these tasks, the sun moved bright into his room. He extinguished the candle and went downstairs to send them off. The smell of cooking rose to greet him and reminded him that he was hungry. It was twenty-four hours since he had eaten.

The days passed rapidly. Dante remained close-immured in his room. He dared not venture out for fear he might meet, all unknowing, Beatrice. To meet her thus, again and suddenly, would surely have revealed the secret that consumed him. He would have died of shame. It was enough that he held the vision of her locked tight within his breast. In the quiet of his chamber he could take it out, relive each incident of that wondrous meeting, relive like any painter the divine lineaments of her face and form. The way she moved, the folds of her dress, the sound of her voice, the surpassing marvel of that last, exquisite gesture—these were the stuff on which he fed.

Yet the more he fed, the more his appetite grew. Lapa, half frantic, brought him earthly food. He disdained it. She called on his former friends for aid. They came and talked and pried. They went away, shaking their heads, saying that poor Dante had gone mad, or that some unknown fair one had scorned his love and brought him to despair. But who might the haughty lady be? They didn't know. For the crazy fellow refused to speak. Whereupon they sought here and there throughout Florence and raised a great hullabaloo.

Manetto Portinari came, with worry on his good-natured face. At twenty he had still the childish roundness of the boy of eleven. He liked Dante. He used to meet him in the street, or at the festivals where young men forgathered. Occasionally he spent some hours in Dante's home. Yet he could never induce his friend to visit him in his own house. No matter when he invited, Dante always had some ready excuse.

He looked at Dante with concern. "Now I didn't believe it when they told me," he said at last. "But you're down to a shadow. Please let me send you my new physician. He came recently to Florence from Montpellier and they say he's as good as any Jew or Arab."

Dante was fond of Manetto for a simple, well-hearted fellow, and because he was Beatrice's brother. If Manetto worried over him then there was no use. They'd probe and pry until someone, sharper than Manetto, found out more than he wished to divulge.

So he said: "No physician can heal me, Manetto. For the root of my trouble is Love."

His friend's eyes rounded with astonishment. "Love," he exclaimed. "Well, now, I never heard of a man pining to a shadow for love! Won't she have you?"

Dante shook his head.

Manetto waxed indignant. "She must be a very stupid girl, then. Tell me her name so I can go and tell her so to her face."

Dante smiled and held silence.

Manetto returned to his home sorely puzzled. "Do you remember Dante Alighieri?" he asked his sister. "When you were a child he crowned you Queen in spite of Forese Donati, who wanted Piccarda. But, of course, you don't. I don't believe he stepped foot in our house since, though I've often wondered why."

Beatrice held her breath. "Dante?" She pretended to reflect. "No, I don't think I remember him. That must have been long ago. What about him?"

"Oh, the poor fellow's in love and wasting away. Some ninny of a girl, no doubt. I'd wring her fool neck if I knew who she was."

He was so agitated he didn't notice the strange look that came into his sister's eyes.

The days passed and gradually Dante's friends ceased coming. It was a time when the young men of Florence did curious things in the name of Love. They wore their clothes negligently and let their hair fall in their eyes. They composed sonnets and sang them in the streets under the windows of their ladies fair. But always they proclaimed their love and their ladies' names. Nay, they bragged of their condition, and grew fat on it. Dante's case was different. Well, if he wished not to talk and desired to sulk in solitude, that was his affair.

So they left him alone.

Dante sat in his chamber and worried. Not over his appearance or his weakness. But over the fact that he had heard nothing from the poets to whom he had sent copies of his sonnet. He needed the advice of those more competent in the interpretation of poetic visions than himself. The more he pondered on its matter, the more the vision—or dream—bothered him. He was afraid it portended some strange evil. Not for himself, but for Beatrice.

Now it was too early for replies to come from Cino, who lived in Pistoia, or from Dante da Maiano. But Guido Cavalcanti was in Florence. Surely he should have heard from him by now. Did the fellow, then, merit his reputation? Because he was a Cavalcanti, did he deem himself superior to an Alighieri? Because he was a poet of much fame, did he disdain the offering of an unknown rival? Dante felt

himself grow hot and his pride rise again. Let this arrogant fellow beware! It might be that this Guido had wrested from that other Guido, Guinizelli, the glory of the Tuscan tongue; but perhaps before long there would be one who would chase them both from the nest. Having thus salved his pride, he fell into despond again. . . .

On the ninth day of his retirement he sat at his accustomed place, idly drawing the figures of angels. He had a pretty knack for drawing, and the Franciscan teachers had encouraged him, thinking that someday he might do sufficiently well to decorate the walls of the new Church of Santa Croce they meditated building. By that time the famous Cimabue would be too old to paint, or dead; and they feared there might be no one left in Florence good enough for the task.

He drew one angel, then another, and another. But each angel resembled the one before. The robe was white and loosely flowing; the hair was golden, and the eyes were green. No matter how he tried, the likeness was of Beatrice as he had met her on the street. Yet no matter how much he tried, the likeness remained weak and inadequate. How, indeed, could he translate to paper what required the hand of an archangel to portray?

As he threw the last offending tablet away he heard a strange voice in the hall beneath, coupled with Lapa's agitated reply. He listened attentively. He didn't recognize the voice; it was a man's and possessed of that easy tone which goes with self-confidence and the knowledge that no one is of better worth than he.

"Does Dante Alighieri live here, Madonna?" he inquired.

"Yes, yes, he does, you—your lordship. Who shall I tell him——?"

"Never mind, please. Just show me to him."

Dante sprang to his feet and pushed the tablets under a vellum roll. Now who could this be? he wondered. Only his former friends had come to see him, and even they had dropped away.

The door opened and an elegant young gentleman entered. He appeared about twenty-five and he carried himself with a proud, almost haughty carriage. For all his youth his face was strongly lined, as of one who spent much of his time in frowning scornfully upon an inferior world and commanding it to be silent in his presence. His dress was rich in texture, though not ornate, and his hat of deep red velvet proclaimed his noble rank.

He stared curiously at the thin young man who confronted him. "Why, he's only a boy," he thought, in amazement. "He can't be more than eighteen. And ill, too."

"Are you Dante Alighieri?" he inquired.

"I am."

The gentleman smiled. The smile transformed his features. The

lines of arrogance and disdain vanished; a rare look of sensitivity and sweetness illumined his face.

"I am Guido Cavalcanti," he said.

Dante felt his knees tremble. The great Cavalcanti, who ranked with the Donati in pride and influence, who was married to a daughter of the fierce and already legendary old Ghibelline, Farinata degli Uberti, who once had it in his power to level Florence to the ground and refused to do it—this prince of poets had condescended to visit him, Dante Alighieri!

"You honour me with your coming, Messer Cavalcanti," he said, a trifle unsteadily.

Still smiling, Cavalcanti took the chair without invitation.

"Guido it is and shall be," he said. "Are we not brethren of one mystery, my Dante? You know, I had the devil's own job finding out who it was who sent me that glorious sonnet."

"But I sent a note with it," stammered Dante.

"You *thought* you did. Your servant left it at the door with one of my retainers and disappeared before I could trace him. I tell you I was beside myself. 'Here in Florence,' I said to myself, 'is hidden a poet of surpassing powers.' It was only by the merest chance I found out it was you. Cino da Pistoia wrote me in great excitement that a marvel had risen in our midst. He mentioned your name and quoted the sonnet for my delectation."

"Then—then you think the sonnet isn't bad?" asked Dante timidly. The pride that had formerly sustained him when all seemed black deserted him in the face of praise.

Guido rose and clapped him on the shoulder. "Bad? Why, man, you have beaten us all at our own game! It sings; it cries out for lute and music. There has been nothing like it since the great Roman poets."

Dante drank in every word in a great, greedy gulp. There was more of music in this speech than in his sonnet. Yet he pretended to shift the theme to casual literary conversation.

"You mean Virgil, of course."

"Virgil, that long-winded, prosy dullard? I mean the divine Horace, the diviner Ovid."

Dante was shocked at this careless scorn of his idol. But Guido was talking on. "Your vision, as you treat it in the poem, demands interpretation. I've tried my hand at it."

The young man suddenly became as timid as the boy. He fumbled in his purse, pulled out a sheet of vellum. "I—I wrote an answering sonnet. It isn't nearly as good as yours, but—I hope you'll think it passable."

He looked entreatingly at Dante. "Shall I read it?"

Dante almost suffocated with joy. Guido Cavalcanti asking *his* permission! The aristocratic poet writing *him* a sonnet!

"You would confer the greatest favour on me by doing so," he said.

Guido smiled and began to read. He read well, in a high-pitched voice that was capable of exact expression and flexibility.

*"Unto my thinking, thou beheld'st all worth,
All joy, as much of good as man may know,
If thou wert in his power who here below
Is honor's righteous lord throughout this earth."*

And it ended:

*Sweet was thy dream; for by that sign, I say,
Surely the opposite shall come to pass."*

When his cadenced voice had finished he asked, "Well, does that explain the purport of your dream?"

A great load lifted from Dante's heart. Guido had hit upon the happy truth. Dreams often indeed went by opposites. Then Beatrice would live and accept of his love!

"I think it does. Your sonnet, Guido," he added generously, "is superb." But in his inmost heart he knew, and he knew Guido knew, it did not compare with his own.

He turned on his new-found friend with a wry smile. "Will you accompany me below to eat? I hadn't realized how famished I am."

CHAPTER VI

*All ye that pass along Love's trodden way,
Pause ye awhile and say
If there be any grief like unto mine:
I pray you that you hearken a short space
Patiently, if my case
Be not a piteous marvel and a sign.*

La Vita Nuova

THE world looked well to Dante. The sky was never so blue, nor the country paths and streams around Florence more delightful. He had a pure and noble love in his heart and he no longer avoided the lady of his beatitude as he had in the days of his despond. And always, as she passed him in the street, she smiled her dazzling smile and saluted him with such a gesture that he was transported into the ninth heaven that moves all things on the mighty wheel of Love.

Sometimes it seemed to him that she paused, as if awaiting his speech. But what had he to say to the blessed creature of his dreams? It was sufficient that he was permitted to behold her and expand his soul in the glory of her smile and gesture.

Under the spell of his new happiness and the encouragement of his friends he began to write. Sonnets, sirventes, and canzoni. He wrote rapidly and well. No longer was it necessary to tear up a score of tablets for each line that remained. He felt his powers grow and stir in ferment. His constant theme was Love—but he played upon the theme with infinite variations. Nor did he name by name the ever-adored one. But this was in the mode. The disciples of the sweet new style did not descend to names.

The poems began to circulate. Fair copies went from hand to hand, chiefly through the aid of Guido, until all Florence knew them. The ladies read them raptly within their chambers and discussed each tender line when they met. They wondered publicly who was the one among them that had generated these melodious flights. They set themselves the task of discovering the devoted fair.

But Beatrice didn't wonder. Neither publicly nor alone. She sealed herself in her chamber to read each lovely stanza as it appeared, and her heart beat more rapidly and the crimson rose in her cheeks. She studied the young poet's movements and made her own path cross in accidental meeting. Each time she paused a trifle to give him the chance to speak. But Dante only gawked and cast his eyes down hurriedly, as if the sight of her had blinded him.

It was pleasant in a way, but after a while, unsatisfying. Time and again she was tempted to speak first, but that would have been unmaidenly. Hadn't she done it once and received no answer? Hadn't her companions twitted her about it until she was ready to sink for shame? She tried other methods. But Manetto, dear, good brother, was too simple to catch her sidelong hints, and nothing came of it.

Dante's cup ran over when the musician, Casella, came one day to ask permission to put his songs to music. Thereafter, wherever he went, he was like to hear his own words rising in melodious strains, the plucked strings of a lute strumming out the tune. At twenty he was famous.

Guido Cavalcanti became his best friend. With Dante Guido forewent his habitual disdain, his arrogance, his impetuous temper. They were brothers of the craft. They exchanged their poems and they criticized in the spirit of perfect friendship. Dante confessed to Guido, under a great oath of secrecy, that the lady he adored was Beatrice, a sweet, ordinary girl of whom there were plenty in Florence; but he said nothing of this to his friend.

Perhaps his judgment was prejudiced by the fact that her name was Beatrice. For he was married to a Beatrice. He had not much use for his Beatrice, and spent as little time as possible in her company. The marriage had been purely political, and the betrothal had taken place when he was a child. It had been the result of a vain attempt to heal the repeated quarrels between the Guelfs and Ghibellines that were breaking Florence asunder. His father, Cavalcante Cavalcanti, had been a leader of the Guelfs. The mighty warrior, Farinata degli Uberti, had led the Ghibellines. It was decided to betroth the son of the one to the daughter of the other. There had been many similar betrothals at the time.

In return for Dante's avowal, Guido confessed that he was in love with the Lady Joan, and that his sonnets were directed to her. Dante saw no harm in the fact that both Guido and the Lady Joan were separately married. This was quite in the spirit of the troubadours and the manners of the day.

Through Guido Dante was initiated into the circle of young men of Florence who considered poetry to be their very lives. Of them all he took most to Lapo Gianni, a young man of twenty-three or four. He was fair-haired and of an exceeding light heart. He made their company merry when they became too darkly serious, and even Guido's sudden moods yielded to his gaiety and essential loveliness. His verse was melodious like a breeze in trees and ran in gentle cadences. But there was no profundity to it, nor inner depths. When you read

it once, or twice, you laid it by and forgot it. Lapo's adoration of the moment was a girl named Lagia.

The three young poets became inseparable. There was hardly a sunny spring or summer day when the comrades did not walk the pleasant path that lay across the Arno; or lay under the trees, hands clasped behind their heads, and stared up at the patterns of interlacing green and broken sun. And always they talked and argued. Or rather, Dante and Guido argued. Lapo, in such times, would hum the latest song or whistle at some passing milkmaid and let the heated words beat emptily past him.

When they spoke of the technique of the canzone and how, perhaps, it might be bettered, he would grin. "Me, I don't bother my head about such things. As long as the last words rhyme and the lines move trippingly what do I care whether a quatrain can be followed by a triplet, whether a word is shaggy or combed out, or whether the feet should exceed the coda in lines and syllables. And I don't worry at all about the respective merits of Latin and the vulgar tongue. I always write in Tuscan." His grin broadened into a laugh. "I couldn't write in Latin, anyway. It's too damned pompous."

Often the argument would turn to philosophy. Guido had read deeply in philosophy and he had been to France, where they made much of such things. "Philosophy," he proclaimed, "is the Queen of the Sciences, the end of all our knowledge."

Dante hadn't read as deeply or as widely. Since the short months with Ser Brunetto, he hadn't had much chance. The good Franciscans weren't keen on Aristotle or Thomas. The little Platonism they could give their pupil was the merest smatter. And now Love and Poetry, twin deities, had invaded his soul and left no room for other studies.

"Of *human* knowledge," he corrected his friend's definition. "Of knowledge gained through the rational power. But theology goes far beyond, and the divine Scriptures."

Guido's face took on a sardonic twist. "So you've also fallen for the prating of the priests, my Dante?"

Dante was shocked. "Prating of the priests? Why, Guido, what do you mean?"

Lapo groaned. "Oh, Lord, if you're going to talk philosophy, I'm off. See that peasant girl pretending to be busy pruning the vines and casting sheep's-eyes our way? When you're through, shout, and I'll be back. That is, if I'm not too busy." He scrambled to his feet, smiled slyly. "What Lagia doesn't know won't hurt her."

He went up the road and spoke to the girl. She nodded, and they disappeared together into the neighbouring wood.

Guido paid no attention to them. He sat up. His handsome

countenance took on the glow of zeal. His tone became harsh. "You've been stuffed with nonsense, my dear fellow," he declared. "You go to your little Church of San Martino because your father went before you, and you hearken to a fat, ignorant priest. You spent some years at the Minorite School, and *they* fed you windy doctrine. Every time you tried to use your mind, they stopped you in your tracks."

"That isn't so. I studied Logic and reasoned about everything."

"Everything?"

"Well, there were certain matters of faith, of course."

"Exactly," Guido said triumphantly. "Just when you come to the really important matters you are stopped. *Faith* is cried at you. This belongs to faith! Read the Scriptures and believe! Close your mind to the testimony of the senses!"

Dante stared. "Have you no faith, then?" he asked.

Guido laughed. His laugh was bitter. "I have a faith, all right. But it's not your faith. I believe in what my five senses tell me. I seek pleasure as I see every animal born on earth by nature seeking pleasure." He noted Dante's gesture. "Oh, I don't mean by pleasure what Lapo means. Pleasure is simply the avoidance of pain. That is the wise man's method of going through life."

"And after life, when your immortal soul comes up for judgment?"

"After life! Immortal soul! Judgment! Words that have been dinned into you so long that you get to believe them. What evidence have we of such things? Have you ever seen a soul distinct from its body? Have you ever seen a living thing that didn't die? No, my friend, we are composed of atoms—indivisible, insensate atoms always in motion. When they dissipate we die, and there's an end to it."

He had become so vehement that Dante forgot his horror. He looked at the proud, bitter face of his friend curiously.

"And are you really happy in this strange belief, my Guido? Are you really glad not to be immortal?"

A dark spasm passed across his eyes. His face twisted. His vehemence fell from him. "No," he said quietly, after a moment. "I'm not happy. I look upon the end of me with fear. I shrink from it with every nerve. Yet I cannot help it. Thus is the world, and so are we poor devils who came into it."

Dante rose. "You've read too much in Epicurus," he observed. "You ought to read Thomas."

Guido rose, too. "I'd rather go to Hell with Epicurus," he retorted, "than to Heaven with your Thomas."

The conversation disturbed Dante. His own studies hadn't unsettled his faith; rather, they had strengthened it. But Florence was full

of advocates of this atheistic Epicurean philosophy. It was common knowledge that most of the older and haughtier Ghibellines had adhered to it. Guido's father-in-law, Farinata, had been notorious for his scoffing disbelief. Guido's own father, though a Guelph, was the subject of gossip. And now Guido himself brazenly professed it.

He hated to think that his friend must go to Hell. Pray God he repented it! It required only a cry at point of death to bring God's infinite mercy into action, and save the erring soul from eternal torment. He sighed. It was the first time he realized that the arrogant Guido was, in truth, a tortured soul, split in twain between his pride of intellect and his inner longing. That must be the reason, he reflected, he presents such a haughty countenance to the outer world. It is a way of hiding his inner hurt.

To wash these thoughts clean from his bosom he went home and composed two poems. One was a list in rhyme of the sixty most beautiful ladies in Florence. He didn't dare put Beatrice's name at the top of the list. That would have proclaimed aloud what he wished to conceal. So he inserted it at random. When he came to read what he had written, he found her name ninth in place. He was impressed by the accident. The number "nine", he thought joyously, is indelibly connected with Beatrice and me. Lagia was thirtieth in line.

The second poem was an address to the three comrade poets and their ladies. It breathed of lotus-land and pleasant yearnings. It was not for other eyes.

*Guido, I wish that Lapo, thou and I,
Could be by spells conveyed, as it were now,
Upon a barque, with all the winds that blow
Across all seas at our good will to hie.
So no mischance nor temper of the sky
Should mar our course with spite or cruel slip;
But we, observing old companionship,
To be companions still should long thereby.
And Lady Joan, and Lady Beatrice,
And her the thirtieth on my roll, with us
Should our good wizard set, o'er seas to move
And not to talk of anything but love:
And they three ever to be well at ease,
As we should be, I think, if this were thus.*

He sent them off to Guido and to Lapo. Guido's reply, in form of sonnet, came the next day. In it he confessed, in some shame, that he no longer loved the Lady Joan. His eyes had turned towards other game.

Dante laughed aloud. His friend, Guido, was obviously a most fickle lover. Might he prove for once as fickle in his dogma?

Dante was not fickle. His love moved in a steady circle around the divine radiance of Beatrice. It seemed to him that wherever she went, the people of Florence ran out to behold her. When she spoke to anyone, that man must lower his eyes and remain abashed, even as Dante did. He was certain he heard the whispers that followed her walk: "This is not a woman, but one of the beautiful angels of Heaven!" Yet always she went with crowned humility, betraying no sign of pride or haughtiness at these salutations that greeted her. A profound joy entered Dante at these things, and he did not deem them the product of his fantasy.

The months went by. His poems gained in popularity. He was, they said, the first poet in Florence; nay, in all Italy. Guido gave ground generously to the young comrade who had surpassed him. Lapo never thought of himself the first, or second, or third. Cino wrote from Pistoia acknowledging the fact.

But the ladies of Florence were not content with mere lovely words. They clamoured for the name of her who was thus greatly glorified. Guido didn't hide the name of Joan, or those who followed her. Lapo was quite frank about Lagia, and those who succeeded her. Why did Dante Alighieri alone make such a mystery of his love?

Thus challenged, the ladies renewed their speculations. They named names and discarded them. But the hunt was closing in. Joan, after her dispossession in Guido's heart, spitefully mentioned Beatrice. It was mere shrewd guesswork on her part, for Guido had been faithful to his oath. Nevertheless, Dante began to fear. Should the blessed name of Beatrice be disclosed to laughter and to gossip, he would have died. His love was not like Guido's, or Lapo's, or Cino's, or any other poet's. It was of a piece with that strong Love which turned the heavens in their ceaseless wheeling; it was remote from all desire and fleshly passion. So he cast about for some means to throw the eager pack from the trail.

One day, restless with thought, he entered the humble portal of San Martino. It was the hour of devotion to the Virgin, and he hoped to soothe his unquiet spirit in the sight of the beautiful ceremony. He slipped quietly into the rear and took his place upon a bench.

The priest was bowed before the image of the Blessed Virgin, and the choir sang, "*Ave, Maria, gratia plena.*" The music and the rich dimness of the autumnal light as it streamed through the stained-glass windows laid their calm fingers upon his brow. He relaxed and let his eyes wander. Then all calmness was gone. On the third row of benches

and across the narrow aisle, sat Beatrice. Her head was low in prayer, and there was a sweetly solemn look upon her face. Immediately the dimness of the church sprang into resplendent illumination. He stared hungrily, feasting his eyes, as a mariner marooned on some inhospitable isle feasts hungrily on the approaching rescue ship.

His gaze was so intense that a lady, in the direct line between, stirred restlessly and moved her head around. She gazed at the man who seemed to be staring at her so and recognized him for Dante Alighieri, the young poet whose sonnets were the talk of Florence. At first she marvelled that he stared at her with such a fixed and burning glance. Then she began to preen herself a bit. Could it be, she thought, that *she* was the object of that strange love which had set female Florence completely by the ears?

She turned in her seat again. Yes, there was no doubt of it! He was gazing on *her*. Flattered, she adjusted her hood to a more comely position and displayed the whiteness of her slender hands. She no longer listened to the service. Her thoughts were busy and tinged with complacent vanity. Dante was a good-looking young man, and his family was noble, if not of the very highest rank. Besides, he was quite famous. How her acquaintances would envy her! She turned again and again.

The people on the neighbouring benches soon perceived her backward glances. They turned themselves to see the reason. Immediately they perceived Dante and his still-fixed stare. They winked to each other knowingly, and whispered: "Oho! Now the secret is out. Look you to what a pass Nella has brought him!"

Dante saw the frequent turnings of the lady and heard the whisperings of the people that rustled above the prayer of the priest. At first he was startled; then a great joy seized him. Here were the means placed in his hands to screen him from the truth. He knew the lady, Nella. She lived in the quarter, and was the daughter of a merchant who had retired from the lucrative trade of money-changing and lived upon his fortune.

Nor was Nella unsightly to the eye. She was about his age, dark-eyed, warm, lively.

Quickly, in pretended disorder at discovery, he rose and quit the church. The smiles and whispers followed him. But Beatrice, devout upon the service, had not even known that he was there.

Dante went home and mapped his campaign. It was a simple one. He took to standing publicly in front of Nella's house and gazing up with soulful eyes at what might have been her chamber window. He followed her in the street, slowly, at a respectable distance, stopping when she stopped, moving when she moved, and put on all the aspect of a lovesick swain.

The affair promptly became public property. Everyone knew that it was Nella who was the object of the poet's adoration.

The ladies gossiped, and their gossip was barbed with malice and offended pride. What plebeian taste! they said. The daughter of a money-changer! Oh, one might call her handsome, if one cared for that coarse, bouncing type. But that a *poet* should be so blind! And to write about a girl like Nella: *The thoughts are broken in my memory, Thou lovely Joy, whene'er I see thy face.* Do you remember also: *She hath that paleness of the pearl that's fit In a fair woman, so much and not more; She is as high as Nature's skill can soar; Beauty is tried by her comparison.* Paleness and pearl indeed! The girl has the blowsy colour of a country wench. My dear, you don't *understand*! All this respectful stuff, this yearning from afar, is mere pretence. I have it on good authority that Dante was seen to sneak into her house on moonless nights.

Guido came to Dante with harsh, biting words. "I never thought it of you, sir. After all your protestations about your Beatrice. If you wish to solace yourself with a low, vulgar amour, at least have the decency to conduct it quietly, and not on such a public scale."

Lapo merely chuckled and slapped him on the back. "So our heaven-borne poet has decided to climb down from his clouds, eh? Well, I can't say as I blame you. She's a neat enough piece. I wouldn't have minded having a go at her myself."

Dante explained.

They stared at him. At length Guido said, slowly: "You've embarked on a dangerous course, my Dante. You don't know what may happen. I'd quit it if I were you."

The old money-changer summoned his daughter. "What's this I hear that's going on between you and Dante Alighieri?"

Nella tossed her head. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Papa."

"You know well enough. Has the young man offered honourable marriage?"

"Why, Papa, he hasn't even spoken to me!"

The old man frowned. "He's compromising your good name. You're in every apprentice's mouth. I'll have to talk to him."

Nella burst into tears. "Don't you dare, Papa!" And she fled to her room.

But she began to wonder. At first her vanity had been mightily tickled. Yet as the days went on, and Dante still kept his distance—though the good Virgin knew she gave him opportunities enough to speak—the initial pleasure palled. People *were* talking, and it was spiteful talk. She had the name but not the fact! Nella was a sensible girl. She realized she was being made to appear foolish.

She determined to bring this speechless poet to the asking point.

She tried all her stratagems. She dropped her 'kerchief in the street. Dante failed to pick it up. She stopped to give him ample time to catch up. The pursuing poet stopped as long as she did. She smiled at him openly, brazenly. He pretended to be gazing somewhere else. In utter mortification she ran home.

She sat down to think it over. There was no doubt he was making a fool of her. What his purpose was she didn't know. Papa was right. All Florence *was* snickering behind her back. So when her father, who had also thought it over, commanded her to quit Florence and spend some months with an aunt in Pisa, she made no protest and went.

Dante was thunderstruck. He didn't know that he was the reason for her sudden departure, but he realized at once that his screen had been abruptly removed and Beatrice's name was again naked to the shafts of speculation. It was necessary, he thought, to put on the habit of a mournful lover. So he sat down and wrote a sonnet bemoaning the departure of his beloved.

The talk reached the ears of Beatrice. At first she didn't believe the tales of her female friends. Women gossiped so. Then she asked her brother, shielding her question with artless indirection. Manetto confirmed the story.

"I don't know what's come over Dante," he sighed. "Nella is all right, but——"

"But what?"

"Well," he blurted out in simple fashion, "I was hoping some day he'd ask to marry *you*."

Cheeks aflame, she cried, "Oh, brother, how *could* you?" Without another word she turned and ran to her room, leaving Manetto to stare after her, mouth agape.

She closed the door and sat down. Her heart was beating so it filled all the room with sound. The tears dropped gently down her cheeks. What was the matter with her? Why did she cry? What was the reason for this unseemly agitation? Dante had never spoken to her. Yet that look in his eyes; that abashment when she gave him salutation! And all those marvellous poems that she knew by heart! Had she been mistaken, then?

She dried her eyes determinedly. She was acting in most unmaidenly fashion. If Dante was in love with Nella, why let him! From now on she'd think no more of him.

It wasn't as easy as she thought.

When the affair took on scandalous proportions; when Nella packed and went to Pisa, and everyone said it was because the faithless poet, having had his will, cast her off, and the girl *had* to go to hide her shame, she took to her room again.

For hours Beatrice sat there, wrestling with herself. The poor thing! she sighed. The utter callousness of Dante! she flamed. Poor me! she moaned.

At last, wearied with her travail, she quit the house secretly and went out to breathe the air. Without knowing where she went, she walked the way towards the San Martino piazza. Lifting her eyes from the pavement on which they had been fixed, she beheld Dante approaching. His gait quickened at the sight of her. His eyes lit up with all the ancient adoration. But this time he seemed about to speak to her.

A wave of anger rolled through Beatrice. *Now* he would speak to her, would he? He had lost all former shame, the shameless one! Oh, he had learned his lesson well. First he had muddled Nella beyond all cleansing; now he wished to do the same to her!

She drew herself up stiffly. She passed the eager young man with face hard and blazing. Her eyes held straight ahead as though he were not there. Her crimson robe, of a colour like the one she had worn when first he saw her with the eyes of love, made an angry sound as it swished by.

He stood as one suddenly bereft of light. Darkness invaded him. What had he done that his lady denied him the heavenly sweetness of her greeting? With a cry he fled the other way, blindly, staggering so that horsemen shouted and reined their horses to one side to avoid riding down the drunken fool. He neither saw the horsemen nor heard their pursuing shouts.

When he came to himself he found that he had quit the town and was running wildly across the open fields. He flung himself on the ground. Sobs tore his throat apart and great tears gushed forth to water the hard earth. After he had wept apace, he fell asleep like a beaten, sobbing child.

It was dark when he awoke, and it seemed to him that he had had a dream in which all things had been made clear. He knew now why his lady, Beatrice, had failed to give him greeting. It was because of Nella—that cursed Nella, whom, in a moment of great folly, he had decided to use as a screen.

He went home immediately, stiff from the ground and worn out with weeping. At feverish pace he wrote a poem, by which he hoped to prove to his beloved that he had been faithful to her, and to her alone, since early childhood.

*Song, 'tis my will that thou do seek out Love,
And go with him where my dear lady is;
That so my cause, the which thy harmonies
Do plead, his better speech may clearly prove.*

After finishing he felt somewhat comforted. Beatrice would understand when she had read it.

Beatrice came home from her interrupted walk. She went straight to the study where her father sat, engaged with public documents. He had become a man of weight and importance in Florence. Three years before he had been chosen one of the new Priors of the Arts. This year again—1285—the people had re-elected him. The office was only for two months; but it was the highest honour available to a citizen of Florence.

He looked up at the unwonted entrance of his daughter. "Well, my dear," he said genially, "what is it?"

She stood straight and a trifle pale before him.

"Father," she said, "you've wanted me to marry Simone de' Bardi."

His face clouded. "Yes, I have, my child. And you've refused. Oh, I know," he added, "that Simone is getting on in years and not as personable a man as some of the young gallants that roll their eyes in Florence and haven't a florin to their names. But Simone is a good, comfortable man and the House of Bardi is the greatest banking-house in Europe." He sighed. "It would have been a splendid thing to link our two families together. There are certain ventures I could embark upon—" He sighed again. "Yet I won't force you, my child."

She trembled a little and her face took on a deeper shade of pallor.

"If you wish it still, Father," she said clearly, "I will marry Simone."

"My dear, dear child!" he exclaimed with joy.

"But it must be understood," she added, "the wedding must be quiet and simple. I wish for no public show nor crying about."

Folco Portinari looked keenly at his daughter. For the first time he saw how drained of colour she was. Like a wise father he said nothing. If there was something back of this sudden decision it would soon blow over. Marriage had a way of healing what young girls considered mortal wounds.

"As you wish, Beatrice."

Forese Donati puffed up the narrow stairs that Lapa showed him, showering maledictions on lean young poets who lived so close to heaven and recked not of their friends. The stairs groaned under his weight, and he groaned with them. Still panting, he burst in on Dante.

"Now the foul fiend seize you, Messer Poet!" he gasped, leaning against the door to rest his weight. "If I did not love you—God knows why—I'd see you damned before I'd climb three stairs to get at you!"

Dante turned from his table, where he had sat, head deep in hands, and smiled wanly.

"Nevertheless, in spite of your good wishes, I'm glad to see you, Bicci."

Forese had changed from the boy of former years. His black brows were almost sunk in folds of fat and his stomach was a fair protrusion. A scar ran irregularly over his face where he had fallen from his horse and gashed his cheek. People said—behind his back—it looked strangely like the brand with which the Commonwealth branded thieves.

"Oh, you are!" he grumbled. "One would never know it, considering how you never see me."

"I've seen no one for two weeks and more, Bicci. I—I'm writing."

It was true that he had seen no one. He hadn't moved a step from the house since the fatal day when Beatrice failed to greet him. He had sent his piteous plea by servant to Guido for publication. And now he waited for a sign that his plaint had been heard. But Guido failed to come. Each day he awoke, trembling, thinking that this would be the day. Each night he moaned upon his pallet, hope ebbled and spent.

Forese seated himself gingerly on a chair. "You poets!" he snorted. "You don't know how to live. You eat parchment instead of food and drink ink instead of wine. No wonder you're such a starveling lot. But I've come to take you out."

"Where to?"

"The wedding feast, of course." He winked. "There'll be a lot of good-looking women present."

"Why, who is married?"

Forese looked at him in surprise. "Don't you know?"

Dante shook his head. "I haven't heard *any* news."

"That's a poet for you! Writes of things that aren't so and doesn't know what's going on under his nose. I shan't tell you, then. If you wish to find out, come along."

Dante reflected. He was weary of sitting indoors and bemoaning himself. It might be a good thing to go out and meet people again.

"Very well," he said. "I'll go."

Forese took him to a great palace hard by the Ponte Vecchio. Its broad stone expanse was new and ornately carved in the modern style. The ancient dwellings that flanked it looked shabby and poor alongside.

"It's the Palace of the Bardi," wondered Dante. "Which one is marrying?"

"Simone."

"A good enough man," Dante nodded indifferently. He didn't ask who was the bride. His thoughts were already far away.

A lackey in black silk with fine white lace for cuffs ushered them

in. They went through a lofty corridor and emerged into a great dining-chamber whose walls were covered all around with fresco paintings depicting scenes from Ovid.

The place was filled with the chatter of many women, high-pitched, incessant. It was the custom of the city that the bride be attended by all her female friends when first she sat down to table in the house of her husband.

The chatter of the women offended Dante. He stared at the painted walls instead. They offended him, too. The colours were harsh and the execution bad.

Forese nudged him in the ribs. "Hey, aren't you going to take a look at the ladies? There are some mighty pretty ones here."

Because he didn't wish to appear discourteous, Dante turned. He was close to the wall, so close that his coat almost brushed the pictured surface.

He let his eyes roam idly about. Forese kept up a running whispered commentary on this one and that. Dante listened with indifference. He knew most of the ladies. What did they mean to him? Let one be fair and one be dark—let this one be rumoured free with her gifts and that one prim as a nun. It was all the same to him. There was only one lady, and she was Beatrice. If . . .

His eyes fixed their gaze. Beatrice! She was here! In the very centre of that shifting group of ladies! His temples began to pound and his hands felt clammy. His mouth was dry with excitement. A mist gathered before his eyes. "Oh, God!" he whispered. "It's a long while since I have feasted my sight. Let not my eyes fail me now."

With a mighty effort he forced the mist to vanish. Blessed Virgin, how beautiful she was, though a trifle pale! But the pallor was the pallor of the angels, whose countenance had no blood to show them red and raw.

But what style headdress did she wear? And her garments? In sudden anguish he grasped at Forese; his eyes were dumb implorings to tell him he had mistook—that it wasn't so.

Forese nodded, pleased. "I thought you'd be surprised, Dante. It's Beatrice Portinari." He chuckled reminiscently. "Remember when you picked her to be Queen instead of Piccarda? Had I a sword then I swear I would have run you through. Well, here little Bice is getting married, and Piccarda—" His face darkened. "Poor, sweet sister! She never had any luck. Corso does things with a damned high hand. Some day I'm going to tell him—hey! What's the matter?"

Dante was limp against the wall. His limbs shook and his eyes were wild. The thick sweat stood out on his forehead.

At the outcry the company turned like a flock of geese, craning

their slender necks. They perceived Dante propped against the wall, like one who had drunken more than he should, and Forese, the notorious tippler, supporting him by the hand.

Now Dante's popularity had failed considerably in Florence since the episode of Nella. The righteous women berated him for his looseness, and the easier ones were louder in condemnation to cover their own shortcomings. Yet here he dared come to the wedding feast, drunk as any peasant. He and Forese Donati were fit company for each other!

One of them snickered and whispered something to her neighbour. The neighbour laughed, and her glance at the reeling poet was filled with mockery. The whisper and the mockery ran round the table. It filled the room and beat about the clouded senses of the stricken man.

Beatrice saw him. She went stiff and cold. Then she saw, and mistook his condition. A look of scorn came into her eyes. Her voice rose above the others. She was laughing, head high; laughing at Dante Alighieri!

As though it were a signal, a gale of laughter swept about the table. The women howled and shrilled, venting their spite on the traitor poet who had betrayed their sex.

One laugh alone pierced his hazy senses. The laugh of Beatrice Bardi, whom the angels knew only by the name of Beatrice Portinari! The very stones around him began to shout. "Die, Dante! Die!" they shrieked until the walls flung back the hideous sound. "Die! Die!"

Forese was bewildered. He didn't know what to make of it. "Quiet, you cackling hens!" he yelled. "Can't you see my friend is ill?"

He took Dante by the arm and led him staggering out. When they reached the safety of the street, he said: "There, the fresh air will bring you to. Those fool women thought you were drunk. What the devil happened to you?"

Dante took deep gulps of air. He brushed his hand across his face as if to clear away a mist. "Forese," he said dully, "I have now set my feet on that point of life, beyond which he must not pass who would return."

Forese fell back a little. "I believe you *are* drunk. You'd better go home."

CHAPTER VII

*It hath been heretofore my chance to see
Horsemen with martial order shifting camp,
To onset sallying, or in muster ranged,
Or in retreat sometimes outstretched for flight.*
Inferno

THE first strong impress of his disaster clutched Dante in a prison cage of steel. He shut himself up in his room and denied himself to all who came to seek him. Guido came and went away perturbed. Lapo shook his head and wondered why any man should take the loss of love so hard. Forese bruited it about that poor Dante must have had a seizure. Manetto, angered for once, spoke hard words to his sister about her unseemly laughter. But when she burst in tears and ordered him away, trouble fell upon him. There was more to this than met his simple eye.

Dante's own eyes were blinded with convulsive weeping. Each morning he arose to find his pallet soaked and dripping. To think that Beatrice, whom he had likened in his fantasy to a spirit direct from God, had chosen to make a mock of him! He paced his room with rapid steps. His hands clenched and the hot, wild words tumbled out.

"Since you come to such scorn through her companionship," he cried, "why do you wish to behold her?"

Then the fit passed and he answered himself piteously. "Because each time you picture to yourself the marvel of her beauty it kills in you all other memories."

Sometimes he wished for death, as for a blessed thing. Other times he thought to go to Pisa and in good earnest take up with Nella. The vision of Santa Croce rose cool and inviting. Its grey, calm walls and gentle monks beckoned as a haven. He would bind the cord about his flanks and become a Franciscan. Then Forese came in dream to tempt him. The close warmth of the tavern, the rattle of dice in leather cup, the reeling home in drunken release.

He began to shiver. Satan stood always at his side, cloven-hoofed and shaggy, leering, pointing him on, showing him the easy path to eternal destruction.

With a loud cry that Lapa heard below and set her all to trembling, he rushed to his table. The familiar tablets showed blank and ready. The pen lay silent by the horn. He seized the pen and flung ink across the tablet. Here was his salvation! Poetry, that dwelt on old Olympus, companion to the gods!

He wrote with feverish haste. The words flowed and moved. Lines gathered and marched across the page.

*Love smiteth me, whose strength is ill to bear;
So that of all my life is left no sign
Except one thought; and that, because 'tis thine,
Leaves not the body but abideth there.*

When the sounds of morning stirred to burst the stillness of the night, a half-dozen sonnets and songs lay fresh upon the table. Dante rose weak and bathed in sweat, but the fit had passed. A deep peace pervaded him. He dropped upon his bed and fell immediately asleep.

When, after many days, he ventured out, he found his secret no longer a secret. His strange collapse at the wedding feast, his thin and haggard air betrayed him. The ladies who had mocked him at the feast repented of their behaviour. They made a point of greeting him with fair, if shamefaced speech.

But Beatrice's gentle heart bled from a hundred gaps. What strange, mad folly had made her act the way she did? Too late she knew the truth! Too late! Too late!

She had married Simone de' Bardi without love. But Simone was kind and considerate in his way. She vowed she'd prove a faithful wife. In marriage there was no special place for love. But Dante?

She sought him out in her noonday stroll. His thin and wasted face shook her with piercing pity and remorse. Since she was a married woman, it was no shame to speak up first.

"I am very sorry, Dante Alighieri," she said, in a low, firm voice. "You must forgive my stupid action. I hope you've quite recovered from your ailment."

Then, before he could reply, she saluted him as had been her former wont, and hastened on her way.

The strength of life flowed back to Dante's limbs. A great content filled all his veins. Forgive? Did one forgive a blessed spirit? With lightsome tread that barely touched the stones of Florence he turned and went back home. The words of a song were seething in his mind.

He was twenty-one now; of man's full estate. It was time to consider what his course should be. He was a poet. But poetry without life, without the strong, rough shocks of the world of men, was mere embroidery, as Ser Brunetto had pointed out. He began to cast around.

Florence was bubbling with life. Trade had never been as prosperous. The merchants waxed fat and rich. The market-place was crowded

from early dawn to the waning of the light. The bridges clamoured with their shops and groaned under the weight of goods that streamed in both directions. The third circle of walls, intended to stretch across the river, was begun. Florence was bursting out at all sides. To the north-west the hammers of stone masons made merry tune on the rising Church of Santa Maria Novella. To the south-east the Franciscans meditated a nobler Santa Croce.

In politics the Merchant Guilds were on the march, and the old nobility, long accustomed to sole power, were steadily, if reluctantly, retreating. The Guilds chose the Priors and placed the chief reins of government in their hands. During their term of office they dwelt in the Tower of the Castagna that leaned against the Badia, so that a sudden rising of the nobles might not catch them unawares. The Podestà and the Captain of the People came, as heretofore, from foreign towns; but their jurisdiction was much curtailed by the Priors.

Dante pondered these facts. He might enter trade. But the thought of buying and selling, of huckstering and bargaining, revolted him. He deemed himself a noble. It was true that some of the nobility, driven by poverty and an appetite for lavish living, had taken to trade. But the other nobles drew their robes aside when they passed and considered them as dead.

He had managed to salvage some little money from the chaos of his father's debts and Lapa had pleaded for the right to use her dowry in his behalf. Since his tastes were simple and he had no greed, there was no necessity to earn his living.

Politics? He was too young and the Guilds made little room for one who was neither great magnate nor a member of their Arts.

War? Florence was at peace. It might not be for long—no time of peace lasted long for Florence; but meanwhile . . .

What then?

He talked it over with his friends, Guido and Lapo. Lapo saw no reason why a poet should do anything but enjoy life and write. Guido, who had spoken so vehemently of pleasure as the end of all things, disagreed.

"Dante is right, Lapo," he declared, "and you're an idle scamp. Since trade, politics, and war are not for him, let him study. I went to France when I was young and learnt much that profits me."

The subject of their discourse lifted his ears. "You wish me to go to France?"

"No. It is too far and too costly. Go to Bologna. Study the seven arts. You're not well enough grounded in them." He smiled. "Study your Thomas if you will; but remember there are others. You'll get enough of Aristotle, read Averroës and Avicenna, the great Arabs."

"You wretch! You think they'll lead me to your Epicurus. Never!"

Guido's smile faded. "You are right again, my Dante. Stick to your faith as long as you can." He shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

Dante went to Bologna.

He was three years in Bologna. He attended the lectures of the doctors and took notes. He sat upon the hard wooden benches—an innovation against which the older doctors thundered. It made the students soft, they said. In *their* day to sit cross-legged upon the straw-strewn floor made men and scholars. He stamped in unison with the others when he didn't like what the master said; and he voted for a solid fine when the teacher came in late. He studied philosophy and a little law; grammar and the Physics of Aristotle. He read the ancient poets and the Provençals by himself. Bologna frowned upon such nonsense.

It was a pleasant enough life and the months passed rapidly. He made few friends, but he didn't care. He was by nature reserved and aloof, and there was always Beatrice to occupy the interstices of his thoughts.

He had long since overcome the first shock of her marriage. What did such earthly ties matter? Had not the troubadours declared that love could not exist between wife and husband? Had they not sung their songs and tuned their lutes to wedded ladies?

The love he held for Beatrice was on a different plane. It was the quiver of the dew towards the sun, the moving up of light towards its first source. She was a shrine before which he knelt and prayed, the point of ecstasy towards which his aspirations yearned. He needed her. Not as man needs woman, but as the world requires the infinite presence of God. Without her he'd be lost, purposeless. With her he had goal and end.

It wasn't necessary to see her in the flesh. He saw her with the keener eyes of the mind. It was sufficient.

In the last year of his stay at Bologna news came from Florence. War had broken out between Florence and Arezzo.

Arezzo from the first had sheltered those proud Ghibellines of Florence who refused to bend the knee and sue for peace in company with their weaker fellows. Safe within the Aretine walls they busied themselves chiefly with conspiracies, as is the custom of exiles. They conspired against their native town and they conspired against the Guelfs of Arezzo. In June of 1287 they helped the Aretines to drive the Guelfs away. Florence promptly declared war. If the Ghibellines

were left unmolested in their success, the Guelf supremacy in all of Tuscany would be endangered.

Dante heard the news and the progress of initial skirmishes. He had just completed his bachelor's defence successfully and he was getting a little tired of further study. The tides of youth ran in his veins and leaped to the clash of arms. He packed his books, saddled his horse, and rode for Florence.

He found the city seething with preparations. The war had spread. Siena joined Florence against Arezzo. But Pisa, at the mouth of the Arno, and controlling the portal to Florentine trade, expelled her own Guelfs. This was an act that boded ill for Florence. She promptly declared war on Pisa; and Lucca joined her as ally.

Since Dante was of noble birth he joined the troop of horse. He was youthful, vigorous, skilled in fence and easy on horseback. Florence gathered its strength. Arezzo and Pisa were formidable foes, and all the Ghibellines in Tuscany had flocked to their banners.

Charles II of Anjou gave the Florentines for their captain Aimery of Narbonne, a skilful fighter, and permitted them to use the royal standard. Meanwhile the Aretines ravages the outer territories of Florence and laid waste their crops.

The Florentines determined on retaliation. They gathered a host. It was the largest ever seen in Florence. The town was an armed camp, and the countryside was pricked out at night with a thousand fires.

On the thirteenth day of May, 1289, the banners of war were taken from their sanctuary. The army began to march. From the walls of the town, from the overhang of houses, from the high towers that still remained intact, a thousand hands and scarves fluttered God-speed, ten thousand people cheered and yelled until they were hoarse.

Dante rode with the select cavalry, very proud of his bright new armour, of the heavy sword that swung at his side, and his position in the fore. He turned in his saddle and looked back at the crowded walls. It further seemed that she was waving to *him*.

His heart sang and he lifted his sword in salute.

"That was Beatrice," he observed to Guido Cavalcanti, who rode at his side.

Guido looked sardonic. "A lover sees his lady in every bush; but it would take a hawk to discern its meat on yonder wall."

Unabashed, Dante began to sing. He sang one of his own songs, to the music of Casella. Guido laughed and joined the refrain. Soon all the horsemen rode to the lilt of his verse. Even the plodding footmen took it up. It pleased Dante. He had been away from Florence a matter of three years, yet they had not forgotten his songs.

They bore their banners first to the abbey at Ripoli, blessed them,

and left them under guard, as was the custom of the Florentines when they went to war. Daily the army swelled. At Monte al Pruno, their main camp, there assembled a mighty force. There were ten thousand foot and sixteen hundred horse, together with mercenaries and allies.

When they were all together Aimery, their captain, moved suddenly. The bells of distant Florence rang their loudest, the blessed banners were removed from Ripoli and placed at the head of the army; the *carroccio*—the car of state, a four-wheeled platform drawn by milk-white oxen and flaunting the Red Lily of Florence on a staff—was set in motion.

Aimery made a feint along the road to Arezzo, to draw the Aretines back to their city for defence; then, with a quick swoop, he shifted to the plain of Casentino.

"Ha!" said Guido. "Our captain's going to pay a visit to Count Guido Novello, to punish him for his sins in being Podestà of Arezzo."

It turned out even so. They set fire to his castle and devastated his lands.

Then, flushed with easy victory, the host rolled out upon the plain towards Campaldino.

"We'll go straight through to Arezzo," said Dante.

"Don't fool yourself, lad," Guido warned him. "We caught them napping once. We won't do it again." He pointed. "See that cloud of dust moving from the hills? I'll wager that's the Aretines."

From the commotion among the captains, the spurring of messengers, the shouting of orders, it was evident that the leaders thought so, too.

Hurriedly they arrayed themselves for battle. The foot soldiers were set in solid ranks. Behind them, like a wall, was placed the baggage train. To one side stood the horse and foot of allied Lucca and Pistoia, commanded by Corso Donati, then Podestà of Pistoia. Aimery, knowing his fiery nature, gave Corso strict command to hold his ground and make no move, on penalty of death. Corso muttered in his beard and said no word aloud.

The cavalry of Florence, as was their right, took up position in the centre.

The dust cloud grew larger. The distant cries of many men, the measured thump of heavy horses, sounded louder on the breeze.

Guido strained his eyes. "They're a good many of them," he said. "About as many as we."

"So much the better," Dante declared with confidence. "There's no glory in defeating a lesser foe."

"You'll have glory enough, and more than enough, before this day is over. Those Ghibellines are experienced fighters."

A mounted messenger rode hurriedly to the waiting cavalry. He spoke to Vieri de' Cerchi, their captain.

Vieri nodded. His face looked grave under its helmet as he turned to his troop.

"A call has come for one hundred and fifty horse to volunteer as forefighters," he said. "It's a dangerous assignment, Messers. On these will fall the first full weight of onset. There may be glory; but there will also be death and grievous wounds."

The horsemen stirred in their saddles and glanced sideways at one another.

Vieri had not come from nobility or a race of warriors. His rise to power had been through trade and resultant riches. He was lame to boot.

He stared briefly at these indecisive nobles who despised him and hated his command.

"I do not blame you," he said quietly. "I choose myself, my son, and my two nephews. The rest may come who will."

"By San Giovanni!" wondered Dante. "I didn't think the Cerchi were so brave."

"It's mere burgher bravado to shame the nobles," growled Guido.

"Nevertheless, I love him for it." Dante spurred his horse forward. "I'll go with you, Messer Vieri," he said.

"Young hothead!" snapped Guido. Then he moved to Dante's side. "You mistook us, Vieri." His tone was arrogant, scornful. "We merely waited to see if you would lead in battle as you do before the populace of Florence."

A chuckle ran along the noble troop. Guido Cavalcanti's tongue was edged. Then they moved forward in a body as volunteers.

Vieri went pale with the insult. But this was not the place to resent their manifest contempt. There would be other places, and his memory was long.

He chose the proper number from the foremost.

"That was unfair, Guido," Dante whispered.

Guido smiled carelessly. He feared no man, much less an upstart trader.

The forefighters formed their ranks ahead of the main body of cavalry. The lancers, the crossbowmen, and the light-armed skirmishers took positions on either flank.

Aimery of Narbonne rode along the files, observing the dispositions with an experienced eye. He nodded with satisfaction. They were close-formed, well-knit, and ready for battle.

Meanwhile the Aretines deployed across the plain. The ground resounded with their tread. The orders of the captains could be

distinctly heard. Swiftly they swung into position, like men well accustomed to war. The morning sun glittered on their armour, and the dust rose beneath their feet. Clouds of skirmishers hovered on their flanks, and their forefighters rode ahead.

The two armies faced each other and there was a hush. The murmur of innumerable men stilled, and even the horses stopped their ceaseless pawing.

Dante felt a little cold, though the day was hot and breathless. He had been in several skirmishes; this was something else. Many a man, now vigorous and brimming with the sap of life, would be a broken corpse before the day was done. He had not thought much on death. No young man does. In his poems he had mentioned death by name; but that was literature. Here was a strange reality.

Was he afraid? He didn't know. His lance seemed curiously heavy to his hand. The image of Beatrice moved before him. Her face was pale and her eyes had lost their lustre. He shivered.

"What day is this?" he asked Guido.

"Saturday, the eleventh of June."

That was St. Barnabas' day, he thought. He uttered a prayer to the Apostle.

And still the armed hosts hung motionless before each other, like two great eagles, wings far-spread, talons extended for the deadly plunge.

A huge shadow raced along the ground and it grew suddenly dark. Dante looked up. Clouds tumbled over the eastern hills and blotted out the sun. Lightning ran along the edges in fiery tracery, and distant thunder muttered. The heat grew stifling.

"Is that a sign?" he wondered.

"It's a sign it's going to rain," said Guido.

A warrior rode in front of the Aretines. He raised his sword. There was a mighty shout.

"Ho, knights, San Donato!"

Instantly the whole mass stirred and set in motion. The forefighters set spurs to horses and plunged ahead, lances levelled, shields uplifted.

Aimery of Narbonne raced before the face of the Florentines, his own sword raised. He had delayed too long.

"Forward, Florentines!" he cried hoarsely.

An answering shout rang out.

"Ho, knights, Narbonne!"

Dante felt himself moving ahead. He had not known he had put spurs to his steed. The rush of foe blotted out the world. They were coming straight for him; each lance pointed directly for his breast.

He gripped his shield convulsively and set his weapon level. He made a little moan. Too late! They had started too late! They'd be hardly under way before the enemy struck!

Guido yelled something to him. The wind of their motion whisked the words away. Then all else was forgotten. The Aretines were upon them.

The shock shivered the plain. Lances thrust savagely, swords swept down with whistling sound, horses stumbled and fell with wild screams. Instantly the plain was smoked with dust, and a flight of arrows choked the sky. Even the lightning flashes were obscured.

Dante found himself fighting for his life. At the first onset the Florentines fell back in wild disorder. Men swept from their steeds and dropped to bloody trappings under maddened hooves. The cries of the dying, the wilder screams of kicking horses, rose like a wall of sound to cut him off from help.

He thrust his lance against a charging knight. The knight staggered and disappeared. But his lance had splintered. He threw it away and drew his sword.

Someone lunged at him. He parried with his shield. The leather burst assunder and the point hewed into the wickerwork beneath. The shock numbed his shoulder. He lashed out with his sword. It clanged against steel. In the dusty turmoil he could not see what damage it had done.

The sweat began to trickle inside his armour. His left arm dragged. Underneath, like blackened demons, crawled foot men of the Aretines, knives in hand to disembowel the horses. He saw a knife turn upward for the twist. He struck at it; and knife and hand disappeared together.

Back he fell, with those of his comrades still alive, yielding to numbers and the fury of the onslaught. The main body of the cavalry received them. The foe pressed on, redoubling their blows. The cavalry went back in disorder; back upon the infantry.

The infantry received the double shock of own horse and the foe. They stood firm. On the flanks the foot men advanced to enclose the tumultuous Aretines, who had left their own supports far behind. The shouts of battle rose to the clouded skies, and the skies rumbled in unison. The main body of the Aretines hurried up.

Back and forth the battle rolled. Everywhere was risen dust, the clash of swords, and the whistling of crossbow bolts. The cavalry reformed and flung themselves upon the struggling mass.

Dante cut and thrust as one does in a dream. His pierced shield was a dead weight on his arm. His mouth burned like a furnace and his voice was thick with dust. Life was an interminable confusion of horses, maddened faces, strokes uplifting and descending. Would the battle

never end? he wondered. Was he condemned for all eternity to blows received and blows returned?

As from a tremendous distance he heard a sudden shout. He forced his heavy lids apart. From the rear, far to the side, a body of men emerged, horse and foot, and ran upon the tumbled flank of the enemy. Corso Donati, disdaining death for disobedience, had led his troop upon the Aretines. "If we lose, I'll die in battle with my fellows," he shouted. "If we conquer, let him who will, come to us in Pistoia and exact the penalty!"

The Aretines, engaged in furious, indecisive fight, now found themselves taken suddenly on the flank. They wavered, broke, and fled.

Immediately the wide plain streamed with running men. They threw their weapons away, their helmets, and everything that might impede their flight. The noble Ghibellines tried to stem the rout, throwing their battle-weary horses again and again at the victorious pursuit. They were cut down, one by one, and the survivors fled to join the broken host.

With fierce shouts of joy the Florentine host fell upon the fleeing foe. The rout became a massacre. The light-armed auxiliaries and the mercenaries took no prisoners. They cut down the shrieking victims and stripped them of their armour and things of value.

Dante rode to the pursuit with the others. But the piteous cries of defenceless men, the bloody slaughter by the mercenaries, made him a little sick.

Running and stumbling over the plain he saw an unhorsed Ghibelline. He knew the man. It was Buonconte da Montefeltro. He had met him in Bologna and they had been friendly in a fashion.

Buonconte's head was bare and his breath whistled.

Suddenly Dante cried out in horror. A French mercenary, in the pay of Florence, ran upon Buonconte furiously. He thrust at him with his sword. Buonconte staggered, and the blood gushed from his pierced throat. The mercenary made to thrust at him again.

With a great cry Dante spurred his tired horse towards them. The assassin heard the angered shout, saw the horseman bear threateningly upon him. He turned and fled for his life.

Buonconte clapped his hand to his throat. Like a blind man, heedless of Dante's pursuing cry, he rushed wildly over the plain. Behind him streamed a trail of bright, red blood.

Dante tried to follow. But the dust rose to obscure the wounded man; and then the first large drops of rain began to fall. There was a great clap of thunder. The skies bellied, and the rain came down in torrents. The earth churned, and the sight of battle and disaster vanished in muddy darkness.

Dante turned his horse and splashed towards the camp. His shoulder burned now and he was deathly sick at heart. All exultation of the victory was banished by the dreadful face of Montefeltro. He had *known* the man. They had broken bread together!

War lost its splendours. He turned his eyes despairingly towards the flooding skies. "Why can't there be peace on earth?" he demanded despairingly. "Didn't the Saviour proclaim peace eternal?"

A thunderbolt broke from the heavens. "Yes," it shouted, "but only to men of good will."

Men of good will? He pondered the problem. He was, perhaps, a little light-headed from his hurt.

Are there not sufficient men of good will on earth? he argued. Surely he was one. So was Manetto, Lapo, Folco Portinari—oh, *any* number. Then the fault must lie elsewhere. He thought again; he was getting drowsy. It must be because men were divided into towns, cities, states. They fought for advantage. Florence against Arezzo; Siena against Pisa; France against Sicily. He struggled to keep his eyes open. If there were a single state, a single empire, a single prince, why, then . . .

His thoughts fled and his horse splashed along without a curb. The rain lashed from the sides and rear, but appeared to open up in front. It seemed that he saw Buonconte da Montefeltro again.

The dying man had fled to the stream of Archiano, at the foot of Casentino. On the bank of the stream, now a raging torrent and swollen with the rain, he staggered, fell. The blood welled from his jagged throat and washed into the muddy river. With a last, convulsive effort he folded his arms upon his breast to make the cross, and a single word made whisper from his lips.

"Mary!"

Even as it seemed to Dante that he looked, the earth beneath parted violently. From the smoking chasm rose a demon. His sharp, grimed face was wreathed in glee and he darted for the torn and timid soul.

But even as his claws strained forward, the boiling heavens fell asunder. Down a shining path of light strode an angel. His face was mighty with compassion.

He took the pallid soul into his arms as though it were a child and bore it swift upon the shining path.

The demon's face was black with wrath. He shook his fist at the departed messenger.

"O thou from Heaven!" he shouted. "Why dost thou rob me of my lawful prey? For one little tear of late repentance you bear away the eternal part of him."

But the angel of God was gone and heard him not.

The demon stared sourly at the tenantless corpse. "With this other will I deal in other fashion."

He kicked it with his cloven foot. The body flew into the raging Archiano and went tumbling down the waters.

Dante awoke to find Guido bent anxiously over him. His armour was loosed and he lay in a tent.

"I thought you'd never wake," said Guido. "Your horse brought you back in a stupor. Your shoulder's bruised, but a few days will put you right. It was a great victory, wasn't it?"

A pleased smile hovered on Dante's lips.

"He was saved."

"Who was saved?"

"Buonconte da Montefeltro. An angel and a demon wrestled for his soul, and the angel won."

Guido stared. "By Jupiter! You're in a fever! The wound must be worse than I thought. I'll get you a leech."

Dante closed his eyes again.

CHAPTER VIII

*The sun ceased, and the stars began to gather,
And each wept at the other;
And birds dropped in mid-flight out of the sky;
And earth shook suddenly;
And I was 'ware of one, hoarse and tired out,
Who asked of me: "Hast thou not heard it said?
Thy lady, she that was so fair, is dead."*

La Vita Nuova

DANTE'S hurts were not serious, but they held him back from the siege of Arezzo that followed the great victory at Campaldino and from the final indecisive struggle.

By August, however, he was sufficiently recovered to take arms again to join in the invasion of Pisan territory. For near a month the Florentines ravaged all the country, while the Pisans shut themselves up in their city and dared not come out.

Even when the invading army set siege to the castle of Caprona, five miles away from Pisa, the frightened burghers did not make a single sally to rescue their beleaguered comrades. Within eight days Caprona capitulated, on assurance of a safe-conduct for the garrison.

The triumphant besiegers made a lane of steel through which the humbled garrison must issue forth. The sun glittered on their armour and burnished the tips of their lances. The trumpets sounded. The huge gate, eight days denied, swung open. Slowly, three abreast, their hands idle at their sides, came the beaten soldiery.

The hemming ranks pressed closer, the better to view their victory. There was a curious stir of steel and a hoarse mutter of voices.

The unarmed footmen looked quickly to the left and right. Terror crept into their eyes. Their faces paled to the colour of ashes. They bent their heads as if they dared to see no more; stealthily they hastened their pace until their feet scuffed the ground in haste to flee the dread that the safe-conduct might be broken. The Florentines jeered and clashed their arms to speed their fearful flight. "Hang them! Hang them!" they shouted after them.

Dante, observant in the fore, pitied the pale wretches for their terror; yet his seeing mind etched on itself each strange half-gesture, each twitch of eye and skin, each sharp intake of breath. More and more he watched for signs like these that told of inner fear and inner joy; small, subtle signs that laid bare the naked soul of man. They

were like swift sketches made upon the spot which, some day, at his leisure, the artist could convert into a careful, full-scale painting.

The wars died down and Florence resumed the ways of peace. Dante didn't return to Bologna, as he had intended, to continue his studies towards the licence of a Master. His brief months as a soldier had brought him close to life again and stirred ambition. It was all very well to write his *ballatas* and seek the truth in Aristotle. But the sap of Florence bubbled all around him, and his own veins swelled in sympathy. The scornful talk of Guido aided in his restlessness.

"We're nobles," averred the proud Cavalcanti, "not stinking tanners of skins and greasy money-changers. Who was it won the battle at Campaldino and compelled Caprona to open its gates? Who made it possible for Florence to extend its trade and domination throughout Tuscany if not our knightly cavalry? Yet now we stand supinely by and let the coward merchants and the artisans take power to themselves and drive us, like meek cattle, into the barns for later slaughter."

Dante thought his friend a trifle unfair. He remembered too well how the knightly cavalry, with himself to the fore, had broken at Campaldino. Had it not been for these same despised burghers, standing firm on foot to receive them as they fell back in disorder, not even the gallant charge of Corso Donati would have snatched the victory from the Aretines. Yet, since Guido was ill to cross in these tirade moods of his, he merely asked:

"So thinks Donati. Would you ally yourself with him?"

Guido's face went dark with passion. "That scoundrel?" he exclaimed. "That man of bloody wrath and unshakable mulishness? I'd rather ally myself with the devil!"

Dante smiled to himself. He thought of the nickname which this same Corso Donati had affixed to Guido. *Cavicchia!* he called him. *Stubborn, tactless man!* There was a feud between the Cavalcanti and the Donati; a feud that went back into the mists of time and had its origin no one knew where.

"If you don't wish to join Donati," he said, "or the merchant guilds, then there remains only the party of Vieri de' Cerchi. He has no use for Corso, either. But then," he added slyly, "Vieri is an upstart. You've said so yourself many a time."

"So I have," Guido admitted with a grimace. "But Vieri isn't the worst sort. After all, he *did* fight valiantly at Campaldino. And," he added, as the clinging argument, "he hates the whole tribe of the Donati."

"That's because they're rivals for the rule of the Guelf Party. I confess, Guido, it's time for every man of worth to aid in directing

Florence along the right path. Yet I can't hate the Donati as a clan. Forese is my friend."

"You'd do well to pick better friends, my Dante. Forese's a glutton and a drunkard. If you'd prick that big belly of his, the filth would overrun all Florence."

"He is my friend," Dante repeated quietly. "Nevertheless, you are right in a way. If Corso gains control, Florence would never be at peace. His pride and violence are insupportable. Vieri is no firebrand."

So they joined the faction of the Cerchi.

It meant little for the while. The lines were slowly being drawn. Each faction sought supports and gathered friends. Peace continued to brood uneasily over Florence.

The end of the year came. The Nativity was celebrated in the churches. Dante continued to compose his poems and to move cautiously in the muddled politics of the day.

The poems were all addressed to Beatrice, or swung in closed orbit about her. He met her sometimes in the street or at the houses of mutual friends. Never did he set foot in the palace of Simone de' Bardi.

Beatrice was gracious. She smiled and gave him salutation and went her way. She was a married woman, and no more beseemed her to a man whose poems, as everyone now knew, were addressed to her. Simone smiled indulgently. Poets were strange people, he reflected, and his wife never gave him cause for worry. Nay, he was proud in his plodding way that she could excite such adoration. Not every lady in Florence had such sonnets composed for her. Everyone assured him they were marvellous sonnets. He accepted their estimate. Poetry gave him a headache. He preferred the clear, exact accounts of his ledgers and the satisfying additions of golden florins. His literary efforts were confined to such statements as: "Enclosed herewith you will find a bill of exchange for ten thousand florins, in gold. Credit this sum against a shipment of silks and spices, as per the attached invoice."

What Beatrice thought, no one knew.

To Dante, now verging on twenty-five, she became more and more of a symbol, a poetic necessity. The tremulous adoration of his earlier youth was gone. He even admitted to himself at times that Beatrice might be merely a lovely woman of flesh and blood and not an actual angel whom God had placed on earth for the purification of mortals. His heart still jumped at the sight of her, it was true, but he didn't feel faint, and the heavens failed to open. Perhaps the fact that she was married, with all that the wedded state entailed, had something to do with the slackening of his emotions. Perhaps he was merely getting older.

In his poems, nevertheless, there was no change. He still wrote:

*No sooner do I lift mine eyes to look
Than the blood seems as shaken from my heart,
And all my pulses beat at once and stop.*

This was right and proper. Poetry was the distilled essence of the human heart. It rapt the mundane soul away to that pure realm where passion was refined, the senses sharpened to an ecstasy of keenness, and all things had their being in close communion with the spheres. It had a language of its own, and that language always spoke of Love.

It was the last day of the year. The cold, keen air penetrated the outer stones and entered his room. The little brazier set up a feeble heat that touched one side but left the other chilled. Dante blew upon his stiffened fingers. He was trying to compose a poem, but his thoughts were thick with cold and moved but slowly. The first line of the sonnet stared back at him: *My lady carries love within her eyes.*

It was a fair enough line, though not unlike a good many he had written. Everything depended on how the theme would be developed. Yet he could go no further. Whatever he wrote down was most inept and lame, and he scratched it out with careful strokes. Spring was the time for poetry, not dull winter. And spring was far away.

So it was that he failed to start with bitter words when his good stepmother burst into his room. He had forbade her many times, and finally she had learned the lesson. Now he almost welcomed her.

Lapa was agitated with news of much import. "Oh, the poor man!" she moaned. "So suddenly to be gone! And his ten orphaned children! What a pity!"

Dante stared. "You speak in riddles, Mother. What poor man? What ten children?"

"Why, don't you know? But there, am I not a befuddled creature! How could you, sitting here in solitude, racking your brain in an icy room—why you don't come downstairs and do your work by the blazing fire is beyond me; I've told you time and again the children will play quietly and not disturb you—and didn't I just hear the news myself from a passing neighbour?"

"Please catch your breath, Mother, and start again. *Who's gone?*"

Lapa looked offended. "I don't need to catch my breath, Dante. My breath is strong, and I speak but little and to the point. Not like some others I could name."

Dante shrugged and turned back to his poem.

"Well, since you're in such a hurry and cannot wait a proper moment, it's Folco Portinari. It came suddenly, while the good man

was seated at his table. He had just wiped his mouth after a drink when the blood rushed to his head and he fell clattering to the floor."

Dante said, "Folco Portinari?" as though he didn't know the name.

"Why, Dante, I'm surprised at you. He's the father of Beatrice, to whom you're always writing. Though I think it time you gave a thought to some nice, unwedded maid instead of paying court to married women. I know it's the style; but I'm old-fashioned enough to——"

Dante seized his hat, clapped it on head, and ran out of the house.

"Your coat!" wailed Lapa after him. "You've forgotten your coat!"

The house of Portinari was already filled with mourners and the curious. The men sat, as was the custom, in one room and the women in another. Manetto wrung his hand in silence. Tears blubbered his round face. His younger brothers clustered about him, wide-eyed, bewildered, yet excited at all the tumult of which they seemed the centre.

"Beatrice?" asked Dante hoarsely. "How does Beatrice take it?"

Manetto jerked his thumb towards the inner room. He tried to talk; instead he burst openly into crying. Forese, for once tender, led him quietly away.

Dante had not seen much of Folco Portinari of late, but he had been a good man of whom no one said any ill. And he had been father to Beatrice! Of all his children he had loved this daughter best; and she him. Now she was sitting in that other room, her fair head bowed in grief, her eyes abrim with tears.

His own eyes filled. He sat down on a bench and put his face in hands to hide his altered countenance.

Two ladies came from the inner room. One shook her head at the other. "How can we be joyful any more, after listening to poor Beatrice's sorrow? I never heard anyone take on so."

The other nudged her. "Look at Dante Alighieri, the poet, sitting there. He's weeping as much as any member of the family."

"Well, you know . . ." and the voice sank to a whisper.

Dante arose and fled from the house.

With the death of Folco something of the old tremulous feeling returned to Dante. He met Beatrice afterwards and nigh swooned with pity at the change that showed in her. Her face took on a pure, ethereal hue, as of one poised for flight. Her eyes shone with a strange, lustrous light. Her hands thinned and became translucent.

Now was she more of spirit, and less of flesh than even in childhood. Dante shook with anguish and tried to comfort her. But his

words were halting, and the deep gravity with which she listened broke him off.

Spring came, but with it no surcease of sorrow. Beatrice moved about with an abstracted air, as one already withdrawn from earthly things. May day came. Florence joyed herself as usual, but Dante found no joy. His lady held to her chamber, close-immured. He roamed the streets, thinking what he might do to ease her hurt.

In his unease he passed into the Street of the Smiths, hard by the Porta San Piero. The sound of hammered anvil aroused him, and another sound. He looked to the source of the noise.

A burly blacksmith, sooty with smoke and singed with fire, was ringing lusty strokes upon the iron. To the measure of his swing he bawled out a song. The song was one of Dante's.

But the smith was out of tune, and he jumbled up the lines. When he forgot a word, he placed in rude ones of his own.

Anger swelled in Dante. Without a word he rushed into the shop, seized the hammer from the forge and flung it out into the street. Then, still without a word, he grasped the tongs, the scales, the pincers, and flung them after. The stones rang with the hail of metal, and a sleepy carter woke up with a jolt as his horse shied in fear and rattled off in flight.

The smith, astounded, shouted in a rage: "What the devil are you doing? Are you mad?"

"What are *you* doing?" Dante retorted.

The smith called on the heavens to witness this affront. "I am about my business," he yelled, "while you're spoiling all my tools by throwing them into the street."

"If you don't want me to spoil *your* things, then be so good as not to spoil *mine*."

The smith stared. "Now what of yours am I spoiling?"

"My song. You presume to sing it, yet you don't give the words as I wrote them. You insert a barbarous jargon of your own. That's *my* business, and you're spoiling it for me."

The blacksmith looked at the hammer in his hand. He seemed tempted to throw it. He opened his mouth for a great retort; closed it in sore puzzlement. He didn't know what to answer. Shaking his head, as though confronted with a madman, he went out into the street, picked up his tools, and returned to work. But he sang no more.

Dante walked on, comforted.

That night Dante had a dream.

It seemed that he saw a concourse of ladies, and they were the ladies

who had been with Beatrice when her father died. Their hair was dishevelled and their eyes were swollen with weeping. They went to and fro and they glanced at him in pity as they passed.

Even as he stared, aghast and wondering, it seemed that suddenly the sun went out, the stars showed themselves and it was night. The flying birds closed their wings and fell dead out of the sky. The earth moaned and shook itself in great convulsions.

A heavy fear lay upon Dante.

In hot haste one made his way to where he stood. He seemed like Manetto.

"Hast thou not heard?" he cried, and tore his hair. "She that was Beatrice hath been taken out of life."

The tears came to Dante, and he wept. He raised his eyes to Heaven as if in anger at this piteous deed.

But behold Heaven was open and a blaze of light. A multitude of angels soared upward on strong wings, and before them rose a pure, white cloud.

"Osanna in excelsis," they sang.

A great peace fell upon Dante. He went to where the body lay, from which that blessed spirit had gone.

It seemed that the ladies were covering it with a veil, and their hair was no longer dishevelled nor their faces swollen with tears.

"Oh, Beatrice!" he sobbed. "Peace be with thee!"

Then he awoke, still thinking that the dream was upon him. So strong was the fantasy and so wild his dread that he waited not for morn to dress and run through the silent streets towards the palace of the Bardi, where his beloved was.

He knocked on the door until he aroused a servant, sleepy-eyed and holding a candle.

"The Lady Beatrice!" he demanded breathlessly. "Is she well?"

The servant stared and answered morosely. "What makes you think she's otherwise? She sleeps, unless this great racket you've made has wakened her."

But Dante was already turned and fled. The servant gazed after him in wonder. "These crazy poets!" she muttered, and went back to her bed.

Nevertheless, the fear that was in Dante remained and made him distraught. He believed in his visions. He knew them as no common dreams; they were signs granted to him by some pitying power as a warning of the future. He didn't know why he had been thus singled out. As far back as he could remember they had come to him. At night when he slept; or sometimes in the heat of day. Perhaps it was because he was a poet, and his mind was attuned to the sensitive influence that

rained down from the stars. Everyone knew that the stars set the impulses of Nature into motion. True, those impulses were not final, and didn't interfere with ultimate free will. But they *did* point the way in which things were going. Why, then, might not those heavenly bodies set up in him, by some strange moving spirit, impulses similar in kind?

He dared not visit Beatrice after his vision. He feared that the imprint of it might show too plainly on his countenance. So he took to haunting Manetto instead. Manetto would shake his head. His honest eyes filled. "She takes it hard, Dante. We all loved our father, but she—I don't know what to do. I've talked to her; Simone talks to her. It doesn't help. She listens with that sweet gravity of hers—and turns away. She barely eats; she barely sleeps."

"Haven't you called a physician? There must be some medicine—"

"We've had five. They quarrel among themselves. One wishes to bleed her; another to give her the water cure. One asks for herbs picked in the dark of the moon; another discourses learnedly on the conjunctions of the planets. Her old confessor came. But what sins has Beatrice to confess? Meanwhile she wastes away."

On a day in June, when the bright sun beckoned all things to life, and the fields were filled to bursting with a sea of flowers, the vision came to pass. Quietly, in her sleep, with her thin hands folded on her bosom, Beatrice died.

Though Dante had expected it, a great cry broke from him when he heard. With Jeremiah he lamented, *How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! how is she become as a widow, she that was great among the nations!*

He shut himself up in his chamber and refused to go to the funeral. What had he to do with a tenantless corpse when the bright spirit had fled? He tried to solace himself with his vision. She had gone to Heaven, from whence she had first come. She was in blessedness, and why should he mourn?

But he wept on and would not be comforted.

Blinded with weeping he tried to put his words in tune. Always the act of composition eased his heart. He wrote:

*The eyes that weep for pity of the heart
Have wept so long that their grief languisheth,
And they have no more tears to weep withal:
And now, if I would ease me of a part
Of what, little by little, leads to death,
It must be done by speech, or not at all.*

He wrote further:

*Beatrice is gone up into high Heaven,
The kingdom where the angels are at peace;
And lives with them and to her friends is dead.*

But when he had finished, the tablets were wet with his tears and the ink was blotched and run. He thrust them aside and great sobs tore his throat.

His poet friends sought to ease his hurt in the way they best knew. Guido sent him a sonnet and Cino a canzone from Pistoia. He read them and sobbed the more.

Lapa tried to tempt him with delicacies. He turned his face away. He neither ate nor slept. His hair grew long and unsheared, and his clothes flapped about his wasted frame. His face grew gaunt and his voice hoarse with so much weeping.

Why had God done this thing to him? he groaned aloud. Where was the justice? There were men and women in Florence—yea, in all the world—whose sins were heavy upon them and their villainies many; yet they still smelled the sweet air and looked upon the lamps of Heaven; while Beatrice, whose every thought had been the purest, whose lightest grace adorned the earth, was dead!

The priests would say—and *he* had said it in his poems—that God had taken her to His bosom. But had He? *Was* there a God? Suppose Guido Cavalcanti were right? Suppose Epicurus had the truth? Then Beatrice was dead and given to the worms. Then soul had perished with the body, and Beatrice was, indeed, dead; dead for all eternity!

He fell from himself aghast, in horror. What had he thought? He crossed himself in haste and tried to pray. But the prayer stiffened on his lips and would not come. He was damned! Well, let him be. If God could do this deed to him, then what had he to do with such a God?

He rose and stared at himself in the burnished metal shield. He stared and didn't recognize the apparition. Was this, indeed, he? That lean, unshaven, savage-looking wretch, whose red-rimmed eyes burned with such a desperate glow? He laughed aloud, and the room echoed with the wild bitterness of his laugh. He must be going mad!

In a sort of frenzy he turned towards the window. He stared outside. At first his sight was clouded with his tears, and he saw nothing. Then vision cleared.

Across the narrow court a house faced his. It belonged, he knew, to kin of the Donati. Always, whenever he looked up from the throes of composition, the windows had been shuttered, blind. But now, directly opposite, a window was suddenly open.

He blinked. Seated at the window was a girl. In her hand was a book, but she wasn't reading. She was gazing full on him.

She was young and she seemed beautiful. Her soft brown hair was gathered on her head. Her brow was fair and her lips were slightly parted. Her soft brown eyes looked gently into his. They were compassionate and full of pity. They did not shift their gaze when they noted his awareness.

The tears burst afresh in Dante's eyes. Through the mist they made he saw that she was also weeping. A moment he stood, sobbing at the sight of such compassion. The gentle drops moved softly down her face.

His heart, long dry, swelled with a certain gladness. Why, she is weeping for *me*, he thought. He wiped his eyes and gazed anew. The young girl bent her head, and the red climbed slowly in her face. Why, there is more than pity in her countenance, he thought. She has the very look of Love!

His heart leaped queerly as it hadn't done since he had lost the blessed sight of Beatrice. A strange warmth gushed through his limbs. If here was Love again——

With a loud cry he thrust from the window and fled wildly from the house. Lapa started in amazement and the children, startled, began to cry. Behind him, spurring him on, he felt the brown eyes pursuing. They felt like darts that pricked and burned with searing fires. What manner of man was he? Beatrice was dead but a week or two and already he was all atremble at the gaze of other women!

What blind instinct brought him to that other house of the Donati he never knew. He burst in upon Forese like a wind that roars from out the mountains.

Forese was just going out. There was a commotion behind him. His wife, Giovannella, whom he had married the year before, had hand upon his cloak.

"Is this what I married you for, you shameless one?" she screamed. "I, that might have married the son of Count Guido Novello? What, are you going out again to your tavern playmates and your whores? You just came in at the rise of sun and snored but a few hours. Woe is me, that I must stand for this! But I won't, I tell you! I'll——"

She was seized with a fit of coughing and was compelled to cease. Her thin frame racked with the coughing and she shook all over.

Forese pulled his cloak away. "Aye, Nella," he said good-humouredly. "It would have been better for you if you had married Count Guido's sprig. I'm no fit husband for you. And better for me," he added softly.

He turned and saw Dante. "Ha!" he cried. "Is it you, in the flesh?" He stared. "Did I say *flesh*? Why, you're nothing but skin and bones.

I wish I could give you some of mine. We'd both be the better. But what brings you out of your retirement? They said you were weeping and moaning away." He wagged his head. "No woman is worth it, Dante."

Dante gazed wildly about. Nella was still coughing, bent almost in twain. Forese shrugged. "Are there devils on your tail?" he asked.

Dante jumped. "There are, Bicci. Look, where are you going now?"

"To the tavern. Where else do I go?"

"Then take me with you."

Forese gazed at him curiously. "You? Why, haven't you always berated me for my sins, like Nella here? What would your Beatrice have thought?"

"Leave Beatrice out of this."

Forese whistled. Then his brow cleared. "So be it, friend." He linked his arm in Dante's. "Bicci and Dante off to the wars! Ho for the tavern and its delights!" He winked. "Let's get away quick, before Nella recovers her voice. She has far more to say—*far* more, my lad!"

CHAPTER IX

*If thou recall to mind
What we were once together, even yet
Remembrance of those days may grieve thee sore.*
Dante to Forese—*Purgatorio*

THE tavern was a dark, low chamber on a dark, unpaven street.

"Bend your head low, my lad," advised Bicci, "or you'll see more stars than ever you beheld." He grinned. "Coming out you needn't worry."

The smell of stale wine and slops, the sudden roars of laughter, the thrusts of fists on table, and the rattle of knives hit Dante square as he bent under the low doorway and entered.

"What have I to do with this?" he thought, in sudden panic. But Bicci held him firmly by the arm.

A long pine table perched on trestles. Long benches ran on either side. At one end a group of men were busy eating. They paid no heed to the rest of the company. They attacked the smoking fowls on the wooden trenchers with long, sharp knives, and washed them down with draughts from earthen cups. On the open hearth a log fire blazed and spitted fowls dripped hissing into the flames.

One man was a pedlar, with his pack close to him on the settle where he could watch it as he ate. A second, sidling closer to the pack, and eyeing it with furtive eyes, seemed a cutpurse from his villainous looks. A third was a merchant with mud-spattered clothes, as though he had travelled a long way. A fourth, with staff leaned against him, was a pilgrim. A dozen holy medals, crudely made, were sewn in careful display to his coat. They showed the shrines to which he had made pilgrimage. Another obvious rogue sat by his side, disgruntled that he had found no better prey.

In a corner by the fire sat a scholar. His stained *cappa* was threadbare and bore the marks of many soils. His beggar's pouch lay open as if, even here, to solicit alms. He read in a tattered book, but ever and anon he raised his eyes and sniffed hungrily at the savoury food.

At the other end of the table sat a merrier crew. The loud laughter came from them, and gusts of sudden quarrels. They seemed thoroughly at home with each other. They were casting dice out of a leather cup. The three dice bounded across the board, and ere they ceased, the men cried aloud what totals they would be. The player who guessed the nearest won. The winner raised and drained his goblet. The losers did

the same, and spat their disgust upon the rush-strewn floor. A minstrel sang a bawdy song, and they wiped their mouths to join in the chorus. Smoking oil lamps yellowed their faces and sent uncertain light across the room.

At the sight of Forese they set up a shout. Voices clamoured.

"Now that Bicci's here the fun'll begin."

"Make room for good old Bicci, who can guzzle more and stuff his paunch more than all of us together."

"Here, take the dice and roll your *zara*. You swindled me last night, but by the imps of Hell I swear I'll have revenge!"

Someone cried: "But whom have you with you? I know him not."

Forese grinned. "That's because you don't come often to Florence, Cecco. Here we know him well. But you should know him by fame, for he is of your trade."

"My trade? A lousy shoemaker, if I had my way. But my father, blast his hide, would have me mealy-mouthed and pious."

They all roared at this, as if they knew the allusion.

"Still hankering after Becchina, eh?" chuckled Forese. "Careful that her horned husband doesn't stab you with his awl, and you'll have neither one trade nor the other."

Cecco grimaced, clapped his hand to his side. "He'll have my knife first. But come, you haven't told me who this is that I should know by fame."

"Dante Alighieri."

"Ah!"

For a moment the two men stared keenly at each other. Dante saw before him a slight, misshapen fellow not older than himself. He was remarkably ugly. One shoulder twisted unpleasantly higher than the other. His face was dark and also twisted. But his eyes glowed with a fierce, almost desperate light. They seemed like burning brands that seared their sockets all around. Furious hate, more furious despair, madness, and a reckless laughter commingled in their depths. "Here's a man who's worse off than I," thought Dante.

"Dante Alighieri, eh?" His thin lips seemed to spit the name. "The sweet-styled poet who sings of taradiddle and fluff. To hear *him* rhyme you'd never know that a woman had a behind and something better in front."

Forese caught Dante quickly by the arm. "Don't you mind Cecco Angiolieri. That's just his way. He means nothing by it. He'd sacrifice his immortal soul for an epigram. He's really envious of your poems. He's a poet, too, in his fashion."

"And a damned good fashion, Bicci. You Florentine pigs don't understand the true nature of satire. In Siena we do better."

He turned to Dante and his face took on a remarkable transformation. It was merry now, jocular, and twinkling with twisted wit. "Pull up next me on the settle, Dante Alighieri. I'll give you a sample of my stuff."

Dante hesitated. He was in a rage. His rage was at this twisted scoundrel who dared speak like that of his sonnets, and at himself for lowering himself thus by coming here. What madness had moved him in Bicci's house?

Cecco noted his hesitation. "Why, the man's thirsty," he cried. "No wonder he's all aglower. Buy him a drink, Bicci, and let him wet his gullet."

"Why don't *you*?"

The Sienese flushed. His dark face went even blacker. Dante saw now what he hadn't seen before. The seedy coat, the tattered edge of shirt, the toeless shoes that the poet tried to hide beneath the table. His rage gave way to pity.

"Well, now," he started.

But Forese beckoned to the host. "Bring on flagons of wine for everyone," he bawled. "And none of your vinegar, either; or I'll skin you alive and nail the mangy hide to your own doorway for a warning."

The host bowed low. "Messer Donati is pleased to jest. He knows my red wine has no superior in all Tuscany."

Then he was away and soon returned with brimming goblets. In the joyous shout that followed all was forgotten.

Dante drank his wine. He tried to emulate the mighty gulps of the others. A smooth warmth ran through his starved stomach. It settled in his legs so that he wobbled to a seat by Cecco. It rose in purple fumes to his head, so that he seemed to soar away.

Suddenly all was fair and jolly. The inn expanded to twice its proper size. The tipplers took on fair and bright proportions. Even Cecco looked a good fellow with whom he could be friends. The memory of his grief drifted upward, like the smoke in the chimney. Beatrice paled into a wraith. The girl at the window, with her brown eyes, pitying and loving, became a blur.

"By all means let us hear your poem, Cecco," he said thickly.

Cecco grinned. His face took on a merry quirk. He sprang up on the settle and recited. His voice was surprisingly strong and vigorous.

*"If I were fire, I'd burn the world away;
If I were wind, I'd turn my storms thereon;
If I were water, I'd soon let it drown;
If I were God, I'd sink it from the day;
If I were Pope, I'd never feel quite gay
Until there was no peace beneath the sun . . ."*

Dante's head nodded. A drowsiness seized him. He rubbed his eyes and listened afresh. Cecco was just ending:

*"If I were Cecco (and that's all my hope),
I'd pick the nicest girl to suit my whim,
And other folk should get the ugly ones."*

He sprang down from the bench to thunderous applause.

"Hurray! Cecco's in fine form today."

"No one like him to troll them out."

"Hey, mine host, another flock of goblets. Bicci will pay for them. Bicci *always* does."

Forese was saying: "You know, Dante, I've tried my hand at some stuff like that. Of course, they don't compare to Cecco's, any more than they compare to yours. But . . ."

Dante nodded. His head was swimming. "Glad to hear it, Bicci. Wish I could do some myself."

Cecco turned suddenly. His dark face was furious.

"If you try to make fun of my poems," he said, in a strange, choked voice, "by God! I'll kill you!"

Dim thoughts blinked in the back of Dante's mind. He should resent the threat. He was no one for taking insult. Then a vast weariness settled like a cloud. There was no call to fight. The man was touchy. Like all scribblers who weren't certain of their craft. That's why he sneered at his betters and sought to drag them to his level. In former days Dante wouldn't have pitied the starveling poet. But his own disaster and the mingled fumes of wine mellowed his contempt.

With an effort he lifted his hand, placed it on Cecco's shoulder. "I'm not—not poking fun," he said, with drunken earnestness. "I mean—every word. Your satire is as good as—Juvenal."

Cecco stared suspiciously, raking his countenance for sign of jest. But Dante's face was rigid and grave.

All the man's fierce pride collapsed. Little twitches ran along his twisted mouth. His eyes went begging and imploring, as does a dog's when still not certain of his master's mood.

"Swear you're not just joking, Dante Alighieri."

"I—swear it, Cecco Angiolieri."

The poet sprang to his feet. His thin chest lifted; his eyes glowed.

"Wine!" he cried. "More wine for my friend, my comrade!"

The innkeeper came slowly. "Who'll pay?" he asked.

"Why . . ." Cecco fumbled for his purse. It was flat and empty.

"Place it on my bill," Forese said good-naturedly.

The next morning Dante overslept. Several times Lapa opened his

door quietly, surveyed her stepson's flushed face and heavy slumber. She sighed and closed the door again. Her heart ached. She loved Dante as though he had been her own. What was to become of him now that he had taken to drink and the company of that black sheep of his family, Forese Donati? In her simple, intuitive way she knew that Dante had been through a tragic period. This strange passion for Beatrice Bardi had been far more profound than she had dreamed. Yet Dante had never sought to do the things that men who loved married women usually did in such cases. Poets were strange folk! Different laws seemed to govern their conduct. If only Dante would settle down and take up the civil law! He had a subtle and a brilliant mind. He would surely make a great success. And now he was drunk! She knelt in her room and prayed to the Virgin to guide him and save his immortal soul.

The sun rode high when Dante awoke. His head was splitting and his tongue was furred and thick. Through his window streamed the cries and clatter of noonday Florence. He groaned. What had happened? The events of the night before were hazed. He had gone with Bicci to a wineshop. He had met Bicci's friends. They had drunk and played at *zara*. Had he won or lost? He didn't know. His purse was flung upon a chair. It seemed empty. They had drunk again. Cecco. Ah, yes, Cecco! The Sienese scribbler with his wretched, railing verses. But they had sworn eternal friendship, had they not? He had a vague memory that they had. Then, as dawn broke, they had staggered into the street. More vague memories. Of shouting bawdy songs along the way until shutters opened and angry folk cried at them to be quiet. Derisive taunts and further songs. It must have been Bicci and Cecco who helped him home. He didn't remember.

He groaned again and rose. Holy Mary! how unsteady his legs were! He bathed his head in the basin Lapa had prepared. He dressed with trembling hands. A great thirst was upon him; there wasn't enough water in the world to satisfy his craving.

The cold laving cleared his brain somewhat. What a mess he had made of himself! He who had been always so sparing in his diet and abstinent!

A loathing seized him. This was no way of life. Then he dropped into a chair and held his head. What other way of life was there? His love for Beatrice had held his life together and made it purposeful. Whenever he desponded—and he had been given to fits of despond—her lovely, serious countenance had come to him and filled his spirit with refreshing gladness. Now she was gone.

Oh, there were those who said her soul was still alive, that it had departed to eternal bliss. Hadn't he himself seen the angels of God

bearing her to Heaven? But supposing his visions were false? Supposing faith itself were false? He shivered. A dreadful pit was opening before his feet. He had once been as certain of his visions as of his faith. And now he had a sickening doubt of both. Had Guido done this with his infidel talk? Or was it the result of Beatrice's death? He didn't know. But he knew he had lost something, something profound that had tied his very being together and made it one.

He rose again. He was athirst and no water would satisfy his thirst. He went to the window and looked out with bloodshot eyes.

The girl was seated at the opposite window.

He blinked. Was this another vision, fumed in his mind by the lingering wine?

She sat exactly as she had sat the day before. Only there was no pretence of book now in her hand. Her eyes caught sight of him. She leaned a little forward. Her face was paler than it had been yesterday, almost as if she had sat and waited without moving ever since. Her eyes were piteous; more piteous than before. They seemed now to pity herself as well as him. The traces of shed tears discoloured her fresh, young cheeks.

He threw up his hand to shield his eyes. Now he knew that his visions were false. For this new vision surely came straight from Hell, to tempt him from his grief for Beatrice. Everyone knew how the Devil sent fair phantasms in the likeness of women to lead men straight to their damnation.

With a loud cry he quit the window and hastened down the stairs. Anything was better than this; even the madness of wine! Drunken folly and the throw of dice were venial sins; but the tempting by phantasms was a mortal kind, from which no one who yielded might hope for escape.

"Where are you going?" cried Lapa after him. "You haven't even eaten."

Then, "Jesus, Blessed Saviour!" she prayed. "Let this madness be of short duration. Bring him back safe and unharmed."

But the madness proved of no short duration. Dante gave himself up wholly to his new-found friends and dissipation. He sank deeper and deeper. By day he slept and by night he caroused. The wineshops of Florence greeted him with clamouring as they did Forese. He was a member of their tribe, a boon companion in their drunken company.

His former friends shook their heads and tried to speak to him. Manetto, Guido, Lapa. He thrust their advice aside as he did their friendship. Guido shook with anger and would have dropped him as a base-born fellow. But he thought it over and sent him a chastening poem instead.

*I come to thee by daytime constantly,
 But in thy thoughts too much of baseness find:
 Greatly it grieves me for thy gentle mind,
 And for thy many virtues gone from thee,
 It was thy wont to shun much company,
 Unto all sorry concourse ill inclined:
 And still thy speech of me, heartfelt and kind,
 Had made me treasure up thy poetry.
 But now I dare not, for thine abject life,
 Make manifest that I approve thy rhymes;
 Nor come I in such sort that thou mayst know.
 Ah! prythee read this sonnet many times:
 So shall that evil one who bred this strife
 Be thrust from thy dishonour'd soul and go.*

Dante read the sonnet only once. With fierce hands he tore it across and threw it away. If that's what Guido wished to think of his course, why let him! Bicci was his friend, and be damned to all prigs like Guido Cavalcanti!

His rhymes? Bah! He'd never write another sonnet again. Cecco was right. His poems *were* taradiddle and fluff. They were fit for boys and green youths; not for *men*.

With drunken gravity he listened to Cecco's latest railing and nodded his head in wavering tune. Now *that* was real meat.

Cecco loved his Becchina in his desperate, twisted way. Not for her pure soul, forsooth, but for those more tangible charms of which his rhymes spoke with a brutal plainness that sent the long table rocking and reeling into laughter.

But his father objected to this low amour. He was wealthy in Siena, yet he held his florins and his eagles from Cecco with a tight, grim fist. He whipped his disreputable son from his house and refused him even a crust of mouldy bread. Cecco hated him and lost no opportunity to scourge him in his verse.

"Hearken to this," he would cry. "I've thought up a new one about my skinflint parent." Then he would declaim:

*"The dreadful and the desperate hate I bear
 My father (to my praise, not to my shame) . . ."*

He shouted himself hoarse, with fury-ridden voice, detailing all the crimes his father had committed, and ended with a menacing gesture:

*"Why, if you knew what I know of his ways,
 You'd tell me that I ought to knock him down."*

Even in his degradation Dante sickened a little at the coarse

invective. He stirred uncomfortably; but another draught of wine brought him around, if not to whole approval, at least to mild acceptance. After all, there was a certain masculine speed and hard directness to this verse he had never achieved in his own. He tried his hand in the same vein, not with much success.

Florence watched his downward path with interested disapproval. It was a pity! they said, and clucked their tongues. Have you heard of Dante's latest escapade? No? Why, it's all over town. Let me tell you. Well, you don't say! It's mighty lucky Alighiero is dead. He was a worthy, respectable man. It's hard on Lapa, of course. But, then, she's only his stepmother.

And so the gossip went. The ladies no longer sang Dante's songs. But the artisans did, with mocking leers. The blacksmith whom Dante had once rushed on in a rage, made it a special point to bawl them out with filthy words inserted when Dante passed his way. But the injured poet went by as though he hadn't heard.

When Dante rose wearily from his bed of mornings, his first move was to close his shutter. Somehow he knew that the girl, or phantasm, or what you will, would be sitting there and waiting patiently. He didn't wish to see her; not even to find out her name. The memory of Beatrice, overlaid though it was with the mire of his decay, precluded further love, or low affair. In his wildest, most besotted moments there was one thing he did not permit—the besmirching of the name of Beatrice.

One evening, in the tavern, a reveller had ventured on a jest. He had almost killed the man. It took a united dozen to pull him off the wretch. Thereafter Beatrice's name was free from bandying.

As the months passed, Dante grew morose. The more he sank, the more morose he became. Some spark within, still deep inlaid, made a tiny coal of protest. In sleep he tossed and moaned and called on Beatrice. But she did not appear. She was dead.

He became ill-tempered and quarrelsome. The wine no longer made him mellow; the more he drank, the more he soured. He began deliberately to pick quarrels.

"Cecco!" he announced one day. "Spare me further praise of your *Becchina*. I've had enough of her. What is she but a low-bred shoemaker's wife?" He waved his hand. "Look at *Bicci*! Look at *Angelo*! Look at *me*! We're noblemen of Florence, not low Sienese. We don't care to hear of your filthy wenches."

Cecco started up, knife in hand. Dante reached for his own. Instantly the tavern was in confusion. The bench toppled with a crash. The innkeeper wrung his hands. "No fighting, please, Messers. The watch will be upon us." Forese jumped on Dante, held his hands pinioned. The others caught at Cecco.

The sweat beaded on Cecco's brow. The flames of Hell blazed in his eyes.

"Now, comrades!" soothed Forese. "What silly brawl is this? Here we're all free. Let Cecco praise his Becchina as he will. Let Dante, if he choose, not listen. Host, more wine!"

They patched the quarrel. The next night Cecco appeared, and with a sidelong glance at Dante, recited:

*"Dante Alighieri in Becchina's praise
Won't have me sing, and bears him like my lord.
He's but a pinchbeck florin, on my word."*

Dante stared moodily into his goblet and was silent.

He quarrelled next with Forese. It wasn't easy to quarrel with him, for Forese took taunts good-naturedly and was slow to anger. This, in turn, angered Dante. In his wine-drenched brain it raised a challenge. He *must* find some way of touching his friend to the quick. How?

One day he sat down and composed some verses. They were in Cecco's bitter style. His hand was unaccustomed and his pen trembled. They were heavy and coarse, and held no wit. But they carried a sting.

He brought them to the tavern. With hand upraised he quieted the carouse.

"Silence!" he shouted. "I have a poem. It's about Bicci."

They glanced at him curiously. Forese wiped his mouth and smiled. Dante fumbled with his tablets. He struck an attitude and read:

*"O Bicci, pretty son of who knows whom
Unless thy mother Lady Tessa tell,
Thy gullet is already crammed too well,
Yet others' food thou needs must now consume.
Lo! he that wears a purse makes ample room
When thou goest by in any public place,
Saying, 'This fellow with the branded face
Is thief apparent from his mother's womb.'"*

There was a deathly quiet. Only Cecco chuckled; and quickly stopped. Forese, for all his degradation, was a Donati. And this was an aimed insult, cruel and personal. Corso, his brother, had carved many a man to bits for much less cause.

Forese's gashed face drained until it was as blank of colour as snow. He set his goblet carefully on the table. Just as carefully he rose and went out.

Dante thrust the offending tablets in his pouch and hurried after. But Forese was gone by the time he reached the street. He went home,

ashamed, tormented. What devil had got in him? What reason had there been for his cruel treatment? Inwardly he knew that he blamed Forese for his present state and that this knowledge, obscurely working, had brought him to the poem. But the thought brought more shame. He was a man, free-willed, to do or not. He needn't put it off on poor Bicci, like some whining coward.

The next day he went to the tavern, fully resolved to apologize. But Forese wasn't there. The others said nothing, as was their wont. It was prudent not to interfere in others' quarrels.

The festivities were well advanced when Forese entered. Dante moved towards him. But Forese waved him aside. He seemed recovered; well-pleased, even.

"You fellows think you're the only ones who can write a pungent satire. Well, listen to this. I was up all night at it. If you don't think I've given Dante tit for tat, I'll crow all day like a cock.

*"Right well I know thou'rt Alighieri's son;
Nay, that revenge alone might warrant it,
Which thou didst take, so clever and complete,
For thy great-uncle who awhile agone
Paid scores in full . . ."*

Dante sat aghast. Forese was right. He was giving tit for tat! A vivid memory arose. Of himself, a boy not yet nine, hearkening to the tirade of his great-aunt against his father; and his father's bowed, shamed head. Another memory, of himself, crying: "When I grow up, Madonna, I'll kill the Sacchetti for you. I swear it."

He had forsworn himself. The Sacchetti still lived. And now Forese made a mock of him for it!

A great fury seized him. He no longer thought of apologies or shame. He would revenge himself; not by the sword, but by the pen. He'd show this Forese Donati!

For the next several nights they read their furious accusations alternately. Dante played coarsely on the theme of Nella's cough and attributed it to Bicci's lack of manhood in bed. Bicci, in a passion, retorted with aspersions on Dante's family.

The affair grew to such proportions that it was obvious to all mere words would soon not suffice. It must end with knives or swords. They waited in dread for that final scene.

But Dante, in the midst of one of his most scurrilous aspersions, broke off suddenly. He stared down at his tablets as if this were the first he had seen of them. A spasm of horror crossed his face. He tore them into shreds and dashed them on the table.

"Forgive me, Bicci," he said, in a low, strange voice. "I've been

mad, stark mad! I meant not a word of these obscenities. I am your friend."

Without another word he strode to the door and disappeared.

The boon companions stared at each other. Cecco raised a sneer. "It was going too far. He was afraid of the consequences."

Forese glared and leaped to his feet. His face purpled. "Dante Alighieri is afraid of no man. Who says so is a liar." He pounded the table. "We've both been crazy mad." His voice rose. "We're all mad. Mad for wallowing like dogs in their vomit. I'm through with this!" he shouted, banging again until the goblets danced and the wine spilled. "Through!" he screamed. "Do you hear?"

Then, sobbing and calling on the saints for aid, he fled.

Dante went to bed with a high fever. He became delirious. The doctors came at Lapa's supplication and bled him copiously; he was too weak and wildered to resist. Then they drenched him with nauseous compounds and placed herbs upon his chest. Yet never, by day or night, did he cease his moaning.

"He's in the hands of God!" the doctors said. "Our science is powerful, but not powerful enough to cast out demons. Messer Alighieri is without doubt possessed. We'd suggest you call in a priest well-skilled in such matters, with bell, book, and candle."

Lapa ran to the good priest of San Martino. He sent her to San Piero Buonconsiglio where there was a famous exorciser. She ran to San Piero.

Meanwhile Dante's fevered brain churned and churned. Like a great sea in storm it heaved up the sunken wreckage of his life and tossed it about for his inspection.

Forese, Cecco, Angelo, rose dripping in blood-red wine and leered and mocked at him; cutpurses plucked his pouch and a blacksmith plunged a branding iron sizzling on his face. Spits rolled round at a terrific speed and splattered him with burning grease. Phantasms, fair of face and hideous of body, swept by and beckoned with obscene gestures. Demons black as soot grasped at his entrails and pulled and pulled, as if indeed his mired soul were seated in his belly.

The storm grew and dashed him with restless fury on great rocks; then whirled him round and round like a leaf in a whirlpool. The tempest howled him on until he bogged in a vast, heaving swamp. The foul mire smeared his face and clogged his limbs, while black rain, hail, and discoloured sleet came down interminably.

Even as he wallowed, a mighty monster with a threefold throat bore down upon him with gaping, eager maw. He strove to flee, but his limbs sucked deeper in the mud. A piercing cry burst from him.

"Beatrice! Angel of God! Save me!"

There was a clap of thunder. Monster and demons fled in fright. The ground firmed beneath him and the tempest died to a gentle wind. The rain ceased and the air dazzled.

Down a ladder of light came Beatrice. She came in a crimson garment and her age was nine. But as she descended, her habit changed to purest white and her form grew tall and slender like one of eighteen.

At first there was anger in her eyes and scorn. Dante fell to his knees.

"I have denied you, Lady Beatrice!" he cried. "I wallowed in filth and let your memory pass. But by that Trinity we both adore be merciful to me. Help me from this bed of pain, or I perish!"

The scorn vanished, and her eyes took on a deepest emerald hue. She raised her hand in healing salutation.

Dante found his pallet drenched. The sweat streamed from his limbs and made little pools. He opened his eyes.

A strange priest stood before him, clad in the vestments of his holy office. In his hand there was a book, black-bound. A candle glowed behind him. Lapa hovered anxiously behind.

"I have seen her!" cried Dante, with weak joy. "She has forgiven me!"

The priest closed his book. He smiled and nodded his head. He thought that Dante spoke of the Holy Virgin.

"She is, indeed, a powerful intercessor, my son," he said mildly. "You were afflicted with strange demons. But praise be to this Holy Book and to the Virgin Mary, you are well again. Let us pray."

It took some time before Dante regained his physical strength. But he felt cleansed and whole. He viewed the past strange months with loathing. The thought of tavern brawls and carousing made him sick. Never again, he vowed, would he yield to these temptations of the flesh.

Lapa bustled about and made him wholesome broths and fed him tender morsels. Her Dantino was well again. Why, for all his age, he was more of a child than her own three children! But there was only one way, she thought, to save a man from the burning Marriage! Only a priest or hermit might remain unwived so long and suffer no hurt. She smiled craftily to herself. She had the very wife in mind for him.

One day, as he was seated by the fire, reading his beloved Virgil, she brought a blushing, shamefaced girl into the house.

"Here is Gemma Donati," she said softly, "come to bring you greeting for your recovery."

She turned in pretended passion at the staring children. "Out into the street with you!" she cried. "Must you forever be underfoot? Get into God's sun and play before I take a broom to you."

They fled, clamouring, and she bustled upstairs. "I've work to do," she muttered. "The day is well-nigh spent."

Dante came to his feet. The book fell from his hand. He gaped like a child.

This was the girl at the window! The fair phantasm who had pitied him with her soft, brown eyes!

The girl bent her head and did not look at him. The flush died and she turned piteous pale.

"You!" he gasped. "Then you *are* real; not a—" He caught himself and stopped.

She stood with head still bent. "I know it seems forward of me to come alone and unattended." Her voice was low, soft as her hair and eyes. "But since I am your neighbour and I know you've been ill and suffering . . ."

Dante took her hand and led her to a seat. Her hand was smooth and soft as her voice.

"So you are Gemma Donati," he wondered. "Then you must be——"

"I am the daughter of Messer Manetto Donati and Lady Maria. We are close kin to your friend, Messer Forese."

"My friend? Yes," he added slowly, "he is my friend." He held no bitterness towards Forese. He had been as much to blame as he.

She raised her eyes timidly. "I used to see you at your window," she said.

"I know."

She seemed to gather strength. "You appeared so ill and distraught. I couldn't but pity you. I—I had heard about your trouble."

"So has everyone, it seems."

She started at the tinge of bitterness in his voice. "Oh, I didn't mean it that way," she said. "The story moved me mightily. It was so wonderful, so like an old romance." She clasped her hands and went on eagerly. "I used to sit and dream about it. Here, in Florence, under my very eyes, and not in distant Provence or in Britain, a brave man worshipped his ideal maiden with a surpassing love."

"I am not a brave man, Gemma."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, but you *are*. Were you not among the forefighters at Campaldino? You are modest. And then, to think how you gave up everything when she died and remained faithful! I'm certain none of the other men I know—my brothers or my kinsfolk—would have done the same. Tell me, please, about your Lady Beatrice. I'm dying to know. Was she fair? Did she speak high or low? Did she love her husband? But there, am I not the silly goose? How could she love her husband, knowing of your adoration?"

Gemma's prattle was pleasant to Dante. It soothed him and helped heal the great hurts that had scarred his breast. She was so pretty and unaffected. She hung with such breathlessness upon his tales. And she gave him a chance to ease his heart about Beatrice. He had spoken only

of his love to Guido and Lapo. But Guido seemed reserved and faintly mocking, as if he hadn't thought so much of this adored Beatrice. It was all right, his manner seemed to say, to write sonnets about one's beloved; but a man mustn't take the sentiments he places on paper too seriously. Lapo thought most girls much the same. If one wasn't at hand, why then another would do about as well.

So he unbended and let the words gush forth.

When it came time for Gemma to go, he took her hand and led her to the door. "I wish you would come again," he declared fervently.

She cast down her eyes. "If you wish," she murmured.

"Tell me," he asked, "what was the book in which you were reading that first time I saw you?"

"The Romance of Lancelot and Guinevere."

Gemma came often. He grew to await her presence with a marked impatience. They spoke always of Beatrice. Gemma seemed insatiable for details. How she dressed, what her manner was, how she appeared when she lay dead. What his dreams were concerning her, how he felt when she had married, how he shook and trembled when she passed him in the street.

"It's all so marvellous," she would exclaim prettily. "I simply can't hear enough about it." Then she stopped herself. "Oh, but if you'd rather not——"

"It's a great blessing for me to talk," he assured her. "You've no idea what a relief it is to speak of these things—to you. You're so understanding, so sympathetic."

She blushed and cast down her eyes.

Lapa went about smiling and humming little tunes. Everything was going so nicely. She spoke in private to Gemma's parents. Manetto Donati spoke in turn to his kinsman, Forese.

Forese said: "Dante Alighieri? He's a splendid fellow for all his former wildness." He grimaced. "I fear I was to blame for that. It was I who led him to the tavern when he was grief-stricken and knew not which way to turn. But I've reformed, Manetto. I stay home with my dear wife and haven't touched a drop since. Have I, Nella?"

Nella coughed. Her cough still troubled her. "It's the truth, Manetto. Forese's a good husband." She wasn't so sure of Dante. There had been talk of a certain rascally scribble in which he had abused her. But she held her peace.

Forese went to Dante and hinted: "You ought to get married, old fellow. This business of being single leads to trouble. Look at me. My Nella's really a good sort, and since I've given up the wineshops, she's

devoted to me. Marriage gives a man stability and something to work for. Think it over."

Lapa's hints were subtle, so she thought. She sang Gemma's praises constantly. She was such a good girl. Never gave her dear parents a moment of worry. She wasn't one of your gadabouts who were so prevalent in Florence, worse luck! She went to church regularly. She knew how to bake and sew, and keep an eye on the servants. That's mighty important, Dantino. If the mistress of the house is lax, the servants will steal the very plate from off your table.

Dante noted the hints. He pondered them. He liked Gemma. She was an excellent listener to his expansive talk. True, she didn't contribute much in the way of ideas; but God knew he had enough of his own. She was soft and pretty, and when she paled for some reason or other, there was a faint resemblance to Beatrice.

And they had Beatrice in common. He could talk for days and days on that beloved subject and never exhaust it. She pitied him when he spoke of his despair, and she went breathless when he talked of his high moments of delight.

True, he didn't love Gemma. After Beatrice there could be no one else. But she understood.

One day, as they were talking in their usual fashion, Gemma stared into the fire. The dancing flames cast a warm glow upon her. She sighed impulsively.

"I could go on like this for ever and ever, Dante. You make everything so plain and yet so wonderful. Do you know, I don't read my romances any more. Your life makes them all so pale and drab."

He stirred. It *was* pleasant this way. He leaned towards her.

"I've been thinking, Gemma."

"Of what?"

"Of us. We get along so well together. Why shouldn't we continue? Will you marry me, Gemma?"

She turned to him so swiftly she hadn't even time to blush.

"Yes, Dante."

"Of course," and he, too, gazed into the fire, "it wouldn't be the same as it had been with Beatrice. You understand that? I could never give up my thoughts about my blessed lady."

She came to him and ruffled his hair. "I wouldn't expect you to, my dear," she said softly. "Beatrice is your ideal. She is like your poetry, something outside this world, this time. Haven't you said so time and again? And she is dead and gone to Heaven." She laughed happily. "We, my dearest, will live here and now."

They were married in the Church of San Martino.

CHAPTER X

And as it is wont to chance that a man goeth in search of silver and beyond his purpose findeth gold, so I, who was seeking to console myself, found not only a cure for my tears, but words of authors, and of sciences, and of books, pondering on which I judged that Philosophy was a thing supreme; and I conceived her after the fashion of a gentle lady.

Convivio

THE new-wed couple established themselves in the ancient house of the Alighieri on the Piazza of San Martino. Lapa offered to move with her children to other quarters, but Dante insisted that she remain.

"You've been all the mother I've known since I was a boy," he told her affectionately. "This is your home as well as mine."

"We'd love to have you stay," agreed Gemma.

Lapa smiled with pleasure. "If it be your will, my children." She considered. "Let me see. Francesco can take Dante's old room on the top floor. The two girls can sleep in the little chamber next door. The third room," she glanced meaningly at Gemma, "well—I hope there'll soon be need of it."

Gemma blushed, as was proper.

"Now for the second floor. I'll move into the rear small room. It will be large enough for my needs. The great room to the front will be yours, my dears. And the next one to it Dante can use for his study. It has a good bolt, so he can be private when he wishes; and the light comes from the north, which is an excellent light. Does that suit you, my children?"

"It suits me," said Dante.

Gemma made a face. "I don't understand one thing," she protested. "From whom is my husband to keep himself bolted?"

"From you." Lapa laughed heartily. "I know how young wives are. They're forever at their husbands, giving them no peace. Dante is a poet, little one. He requires proper quiet and solitude in which to think and write. How long was it, Dantino, before I learned not to burst in upon you with my gossip?"

"You never learned, Mother." Dante chuckled her under the chin. He said eagerly: "You are a wonder for divining what I need. I'll put up shelves and line them with my books. I intend to study—and study!"

Gemma made another face. "And while you're studying, what am I supposed to do?"

"Do? Why, do what all good wives do. Run the household with Mother Lapa and—and—do whatever other women do."

It took some time to make the necessary changes and arrange the household to accommodate two families instead of one.

Meanwhile friends and relations came to pay their formal respects. Gemma's parents were glad to see her married. They were also much relieved when Dante didn't quibble over the amount of dowry they offered him. It was a moderate sum and hardly becoming to a Donati. But they were not wealthy, and their more powerful kinsfolk, on whom they might have depended for help, were in no better circumstances. Besides, there were the other children to consider.

Forese was equally glad. He grinned at his old boon companion. "Now we're kinsmen, hey? Well, I always said that though wine is red, blood is redder. We'll have to stick together."

Corso Donati came. The appearance of this great head of the great Donati clan created a stir. His retainers, without whom he never quit his fortress palace, swarmed outside the door and stared insolently and provocatively at the passers-by, so that the more timid skirted the church across the piazza and hurried their pace.

Corso walked into the living quarters with a rattle of spurs and a careless clank of sword. He was a handsome man, but his manner was haughty and his demeanour overbearing. He feared no man and he was feared by all. Wherever he went, storm and sudden death accompanied him. That he was brave, no one questioned; that he was ambitious, no one doubted. He resented fiercely the upstart rich who claimed to be on terms of equality with the old nobility. He gnawed his lip in bitter wrath whenever Vieri de' Cerchi rode past in pomp, concealing his lameness by a specially-contrived saddle.

He refused the seat that Dante proffered him. He stood erect, unbending. First he greeted his kinswoman with a little nod. Then he turned his attention to his new relation. His gaze was bold and keen, and Dante flushed under the stare.

"My brother, Forese," he began abruptly, "speaks well of you. But then, Forese isn't a good judge."

Dante darkened. "He's good enough," he said.

"Spoken like a man," Corso unbent a little. "You fought at Campaldino, didn't you?"

"Among the forefighters."

Corso sighed. "It was a good battle. Would to God we had more of them! But the Florentines pay more attention now to their miserly wool and money-lending than to war and feats of arms. Look at that Ass of the Gate, Cerchi."

Dante resented his new kinsman's manner. "He fought bravely at

Campaldino," he retorted boldly. "There are those who say he helped swing the tide."

The blood rushed to Corso's head. He put his hand on the pommel of his sword. "They lie who say that!" he said fiercely. "He was thrown back and broken on the first assault. Had it not been for my Pistoians——"

"I beg of you, Cousin Corso . . ." implored Gemma.

He quieted. "True, little kinswoman. I came not here to fight old battles, but to wish you well. Nevertheless——" he looked askance at Dante—"your husband has been said to be of Cerchi's party. Now that he is allied to the Donati, however, it would be fitting that he change his company."

"Naturally," said Gemma confidently, "you needn't fear about my Dante."

Anger stirred in Dante. He was no pawn to be disposed of by his new kinsfolk. Nor was it proper for a wife to speak up for her husband. He hadn't mixed much in the factious struggle, and his adherence to Cerchi was of the slightest; but he didn't intend *anyone* to decide for him. It was on the tip of his tongue to say so in short words, when the door opened and Guido Cavalcanti entered.

His face cleared and he went to him with outstretched hands. "Welcome, Guido. I was wondering what happened that you failed to attend the wedding."

"I was in Padua on business. I came as soon as I returned and heard. Much happiness to you and—Ah!"

His countenance changed as he saw Corso. A bitter, scornful look displaced his former smile. Corso stared haughtily. His long, powerful fingers played with his sword. The room filled with menace.

Dante stepped between them. "I know you two are not on terms," he said, in quiet tones. "But this is my household."

"I clean forgot it," scowled Corso, "when I saw the Cavalcanti." He bowed to Gemma. "Farewell, Cousin. I like not the company you keep." He twitched his mantle to himself and stalked out. His spurs clattered as he went.

"*Malefammi!*" said Guido with contempt. Then he, too, bowed. "Forgive me, Dante—and you, Donna Gemma. I'll see you on another occasion." Then he, too, went out.

"Oh, I think he's horrid!" burst out Gemma.

"Who, my dear?"

"Why, your Guido, of course. Cousin Corso was right to be offended."

"Guido is my friend," said Dante shortly. Then he sighed. Marriage was not the easy thing that he had thought.

Wifehood pleased Gemma. She busied herself with the care of the household, under Lapa's tutelage. She made friends with the other wives in the quarter and joined them in their daily gossip. She enjoyed the new freedom. Now that she was a married woman she no longer needed the attendance of an elder lady when she went out. She could talk as she pleased, laugh when she wished, and hear tales unabashed that formerly were too indelicate for a maiden's ears. She was soon with child, and in due time gave birth to a healthy boy whom they named Pietro. If she didn't quite understand her husband, she found out quickly enough that very few among her wedded friends understood their husbands, either.

Dante understood her well enough. He soon plumbed her depths and found them shallow. She was no more, no less, than a dozen wives of his acquaintance. Well, had he really expected more? She was pretty, and warm, and her tongue rattled on. He had married her to ease his hurt; if the hurt remained it wasn't her fault. He was just enough to see that.

But he took more and more to thinking of Beatrice. He never thought of her as having been married while on earth, any more than he considered his own marriage now in relation to Beatrice. His love was on no plane of sex. It was a noble passion that enshrined her while she was alive and grew more worshipful now she was dead. Dead? In his dreams he saw her seated in high Heaven, radiant with glory, smiling on the lesser angels, gazing rapt into the illimitable bosom of God. Sometimes, especially at night, he longed for her with a tremendous longing. He lay awake, with Gemma's breathing in his ears, and yearned for Beatrice. But it seemed that more and more her face averted from him in her high estate, as though she were offended. She veiled herself in light, and he was no longer able to scan those blessed features.

"What have I done?" he cried out in such loud tones that Gemma awoke and told him peevishly to go to sleep.

Then he lay quiet and stiff, staring into the dark, wondering. *What had he done?*

He told Gemma in the morning, "It's a curious thing, but I no longer seem to be able to remember how Beatrice looked."

"And a good thing, too," she retorted tartly.

He stared at her, surprised. "You were always eager for me to tell you each detail of her countenance."

"She was a woman, wasn't she? She looked like any other woman."

Dante was offended. "She did not. She was like no woman on earth."

"Well, she isn't on earth any more. It's high time, Dante, you remember you're married to *me*."

"What has *that* got to do with it?"

"Plenty!" And she flung away from him.

"It must be Gemma is so short because she's pregnant again," he thought.

He sat in his study and tried his hand at a sonnet on Beatrice. But his brain was stiff and inflexible. He tore up everything he wrote. "Have I lost my skill?" he wondered.

He took his problem to Guido in the palace of the Cavalcanti. Guido rarely came to the house on San Martino. Gemma's courtesy, when he did, was scant; for did he not hate the Donati?

Guido listened gravely. "I had hoped," said Dante in despair, "to write that concerning Beatrice which had never been written before. Yet I sit and sit, and nothing comes."

"It's marriage, my friend. The first year or two is always bad for the poet's art." His face twisted. "Be patient and you'll get over it. Why don't you in the meantime do something with the sonnets you've already written? Bind them into a sequence, with a commentary, and make them into a book?"

Dante nodded. "It's a good idea."

"But use the Tuscan tongue for your commentary. Don't use Latin. Our writers seem to think that while Tuscan is good enough for poetry, prose requires the dignity of Latin. That's nonsense. It's time we did for prose what we've already done for poetry. We've been bound to the tradition too long." He laid his hand on his friend. "If anyone can do it, it is you," he added warmly.

Dante went home and reread his scattered sonnets and canzoni. "They *are* good," he approved. "If only," he said bitterly, "I could do as well again."

He placed them in order and wove a tale about them. It was a tender tale, full of high passion and curious turns of phrases. As he wrote his heart quivered, as it had when he was young. He told the story of the day when he had first gazed on Beatrice in her robe of crimson; and ended with the fatal day of death and his ensuing anguish. His tears dropped large at the memory and spotted the parchment. He added commentaries to the poems, as was the custom, and embodied them like golden nuggets in the text.

When he had finished he sent out several copies. One went to Guido, one to Cino in Pistoia, one to Lapo, and a final one to Ser Brunetto.

Ser Brunetto was an old man now. He lay ill at home and his strength was slowly failing. Dante hadn't seen much of him since the day he had quit his school. Yet, for all his horror then, and horror now in retrospect, he felt exceeding gratitude to the teacher who had

placed his feet upon the path of learning. In precise script he wrote upon the several covers: *LA VITA NUOVA par Dante Alighieri*.

Guido was excited. "It's the finest thing that has been done by anyone now living," he declared. "No longer will the Provençals sneer at our efforts. With you, my Dante, Tuscan is raised to a place of equality with the ancient Latin."

Ser Brunetto wrote him a little note. The penmanship quavered and the words were almost illegible. But it was kind.

"I've always said that if only you followed your star, you'd come to a glorious haven. You have justified my belief. I am proud that a pupil of mine has done this masterpiece. I am old and ill, Dante, and my remaining years will not be many. I commend my *Tesoro* to thee; I couldn't leave it in better hands."

Dante found himself famous again. From all sides praise poured in. His songs resumed their sway upon the public streets, and in the gatherings of the ladies.

Only Gemma complained. "Beatrice! Beatrice! Will there never be an end to this Beatrice? Must I go through life eternally hearing about your former love?"

"It was because you were so pitying about my grief for this same Beatrice that I married you, Gemma."

"Of course I pitied you. What woman wouldn't, seeing a young man moping over the dead? But two years have passed. It's high time you think of *me* a little."

"Since that's the way you feel," he said carefully, "I'll never mention her name to you again."

"But you'll *think* of her, won't you? And how do you suppose I'll feel, knowing that my husband is always dreaming of another?"

Dante went into his study and bolted the door.

In spite of this new fame he wasn't satisfied. Beatrice continued to absent herself and his faculties continued dim. Whatever he wrote further was of no avail. It seemed in truth that by this public blazon of his love he had offended Beatrice as well as Gemma.

He threw aside his tablets in despair. He picked up Boëthius' little volume on the *Consolation of Philosophy*. He required much consolation himself, he thought.

It was at first difficult reading, as the Latin was different from the earlier classical writers and the meaning hard. But as he read on and gathered the sense, excitement mounted in him. Was he not in a similar case with Boëthius? Was he not also a captive and an exile? True Boëthius languished in prison, awaiting death, when he wrote his noble thoughts. But Dante's prison, though not of walls and chains, was

equally as rigid. His mind was fettered, and his soul. Grief chained him down, and his powers were sluggish. And Beatrice had exiled him from his former state of bliss. If Boëthius could thus find consolation in this gentle lady whom he called Philosophy, why might not he?

When he had finished, all atremble, he started on the book that Cicero wrote, treating of Friendship. In it, he had heard, the famous orator touched on the consolation of Lelius for the death of his friend, Scipio.

The great phrases resounded in his mind.

Here was the answer, he cried. He had set up one Lady for his adoration. She had averted her face and left him in darkness. But here was another Lady, equally gentle, equally compassionate, whose countenance would never cloud as long as he had eyes to read and a mind to contemplate. Her name was *Philosophy*!

He walked his room in agitation. Life flowed strongly in his limbs, and new-found powers. He felt exalted. He would devote himself, he vowed, to the worship of this second Lady. He would forget the first. He was only twenty-seven, and a life of study and meditation made a dazzling vista before him. So full was he to brimming and so complete was his delight, that he flung himself upon his discarded tablets and composed an ode.

*Who would behold salvation,
Heedfully let him look upon this lady's eyes.*

And again:

*See how tender she is and humble
Sage and courteous in her greatness.*

The lines flowed with all their old grace and vigour.

Refreshed and gladdened, he gave himself with all the impetuosity of his nature to his new and more beauteous Lady. She was, he cried, the daughter of God, queen of all, most noble and beauteous Philosophy!

He sought her passionately, wherever she was to be found. In the great masters of the Dominicans—Albertus Magnus and Thomas of Aquino. Among the Franciscans—Bonaventura. He tried St. Augustine again and drank deep at the mighty fount of Aristotle. Nothing escaped his frenzy for knowledge. He ranged from Dionysius the Areopagite to the strange half-heresies of Siger of Brabant. He pored in Hugh of St. Victor and wondered at the wild "perfection" of Joachim of Flora.

He shut himself up in his bolted retreat and read half-way through

the night. He lived in a strange new ecstasy. The sweetness of discovered truth enfolded him. He forgot Beatrice; he forgot Gemma; he forgot the world. His nature required a fixed point of aspiration. Once it was Beatrice; now it was Philosophy. To his glowing mind there was no dissimilarity in kind. Philosophy became as real and warm as had the girl of flesh and blood. He personified her; he addressed her as one does a beloved woman; he became enamoured of her. "Her beauty," he wrote, "rains down flamelets of fire!"

To Gemma this new phase of her queer husband was even more suspicious than the first. At least she could understand—in a manner—his love for Beatrice. But Philosophy? "Ah!" she thought, "he seeks to fool me. He's fallen in love with some strumpet, no doubt, and to hide her from me he calls her Philosophy. What these men will do!"

She set jealous watch. But he hardly ever went out, and when he did it was to Guido or to the Schools of the Friars where he attended disputations. She followed him, secretly, to make certain.

But her anger fed on lack of fuel.

"You shut yourself up night after night and leave me to perish of cold alone in bed," she cried. "Am I not good enough for you? Am I not flesh? Do I not carry your second son under my heart?"

"You are well enough," he answered. "I am at my studies."

"Studies!" she screamed. "Is that what you call it? Study *me* for a change. I go to places where wives forgather with their husbands, and they ask me where *my* husband is. I am ashamed to tell them."

"All right! All right!" he said, with a smile. "I'll go with you if that will make you feel better."

But the gatherings in which Gemma delighted struck him as vanities and places of idle chatter. The women picked their absent friends to pieces, and the men were just as empty in their talk of daily happenings. Dante sat aloof, grim of visage, impatient for the time when Gemma would decide to go home and he could return to his beloved books.

"Have you lost your tongue?" Gemma would inquire. "You used to talk enough *before* we were married."

"You make up for me now," he told her, "you and your friends. I'll go no more."

It was the same with politics. New frays had broken out in Florence, and matters of great import. Here it was Guido who upbraided him.

"It's time you forgot your sterile philosophizing," he said angrily. "It's well enough to read and study; but it's better to be a man of action. You're twenty-eight, you know; you're no longer a youth of eighteen. Come out of your cloistered retreat and help me. God knows we need every active hand."

"Why, what has happened, Guido?" Dante asked mildly.

Guido stared. Then he laughed harshly. "You *are* a hermit, aren't you? Here's all Florence convulsed, and you merely blink like a bat come into the light and ask me what's happened. Let me tell you, my recluse. There's war on—war to the death! That precious kinsman of your dead great-uncle—Giano della Bello—has gathered the rabble to his banner and sworn destruction to the nobles. And he's coming close to doing it, too, with his so-called Ordinances of Justice."

His voice rose in wrath. "Let me tell you how they go. If there be even a single noble in your family, you are ineligible to hold public office. If a fifth cousin of yours commits an outrage—and you are a noble—you are personally responsible to the Commonwealth. Should you be riding along the street and your horse's tail so much as swish a greasy artisan in the face, you're haled before the magistrates and your house is torn down."

"Come now, Guido. You're exaggerating."

"I am not. If you'd emerge for a few days you'd find out fast enough."

Dante shrugged. He changed the subject. "Do you know," he said, "I'm beginning to lean a little to the Averroistic tenets? Remember our first discussions? Well . . ."

But Guido clapped on his hat and ran out of his own house.

Dante went back to his studying and the composition of odes addressed to his beloved Philosophy. What mattered a petty turmoil in Florence when a whole world of truth and beauty lay exposed for the refreshment of his eyes.

But his eyes soon lost their refreshment. The long nights of arduous reading by candle and pale oil lamp took their revenge. The fair, written page danced and blurred. He rose and tried to rest his tired vision with the calm sight of the stars. But the stars danced and blurred, too, and seemed shadowed with a kind of halo. He tried his book again. There was no further reading.

He went to bed, hoping that in the morning his vision would be clearer. But the morning brought no relief. The day was shadowed with cloud, he thought.

"It's a dark, drear day, isn't it?" he asked Gemma.

She stared at him. "Have you gone mad with your Philosophy?" she demanded. "I've never seen a fairer, sunnier day."

Then he knew that he was nearly blind. He groped to a seat and sank into it. He bowed his head into his hands, and the slow tears trickled through his fingers.

"What is the matter, Dante?" asked Gemma, alarmed.

"Nothing, Gemma, nothing at all except that I can no longer see."

She set up a great cry. "Blind! Now may San Giovanni come to our aid. A blind husband in the prime of life! Oh, I knew something terrible would happen. Books! Books! Bolting yourself in all the night, doing God knows what! What is to become of me and my poor little children?"

He lifted his head. She was a grey, blurred mass. "It isn't as bad as that," he said gently. "I can still see in a fashion. The visual spirits are merely weakened and dispersed."

"*Visual spirits dispersed!* The man knows *everything*, except how to keep his sight and be a proper husband!"

"Don't shout so. I have enough to think about to find a cure."

"Well, stop your thinking this moment. You're going to the shrine of Santa Lucia and pray to the blessed saint to remove your affliction."

"It isn't necessary. If I bathe my eyes in clear water and repose long in a cool, dark place——"

"Holy Virgin, but the man will drive me mad! I say you're going to Santa Lucia. Doesn't she watch over the eyes? Don't the blind come from all over Italy to submit to her touch?"

"I'll go, Gemma. But I still think bathing the eyes and rest . . ."

He took his turn to kneel before the blessed saint. He hadn't thought there were so many blind and afflicted in the world. They came in endless stream, weeping from sightless sockets, led by children, wives, and husbands to implore her grace and mercy.

Finally he kneeled and the murmur of the waiting crowd and the weeping fell away. He was alone with the saint.

He gazed up at her calm and pitying face. His weak eyes strained to catch her glance. He prayed with clasped hands. His prayer flowed forth like a released stream.

"Santa Lucia, mother of illumination and protectress of light! Gaze in thy heavenly mercy upon the poor, blinded one who now implores thee. Grant me my former strength of eye and hold it safe. Let me not wander the world in darkness. Let mine eyes behold the light of day and the beautiful things which God has strewn on earth for man's delectation. Let me read again in the Holy Book and in the philosophers who seek the truth in the light of God's reason. Cut me not off from my beloved books. Shed the dew of thy bountiful mercy upon me and make me to see again."

The priest dipped his fingers in the holy water and sprinkled it lightly on his weeping eyes. Then he made the sign of the cross and uttered a prayer.

It seemed to Dante that a shaft of light pierced the mist with which he was surrounded. It seemed that the saint inclined her head to him.

He rose and went home. There he bathed his eyes and took to his

study. He closed the shutters so that the room was dark and cool. At regular intervals he laved his eyes with clear spring water, brought specially from the neighbouring hill of Fiesole, and he rested.

In three months the halos disappeared and the dancing vanished. In three more months the blur was gone and his eyes regained their function. He could see again; and he could read.

"There, didn't I tell you Santa Lucia would heal you?" demanded Gemma triumphantly.

"She has worked a miracle," he agreed reverently.

"Then listen to me further. Leave off your old books and tempt not her anger. This time, if you blind yourself, she'll refuse to help you."

"Woman," he told her sternly, "for what other reason did I pray for sight if not to read and ponder on the reading?"

Gemma threw up her hands. "Now indeed do I know I've married a lunatic husband."

But the door was already bolted.

CHAPTER XI

*Rejoice, O Florence, which art grown so great
That over land and sea thou flappest thy wings,
And hear'st through hell thy name reverberate.*

Inferno

SER BRUNETTO LATINI died in the year 1294, full of years and honours. He was given a great funeral. Since he had been secretary to the Commonwealth and a great orator, the Podestà, the Captain of the People, and the Great Council marched behind his bier. Since he was a learned man and a philosopher, the students, the young men, and the lettered joined the procession. Since he had been President of their Art and their chiefest ornament, the Guild of Notaries moved slowly behind their azure banner with its golden star. Since it was a spectacle, the people flocked indiscriminately along.

Dante gazed upon the sea of torches and heard the great bells swing in unison. He meditated on fate and the inexorable passage of time. Once more he was a boy of thirteen, eager, athirst, speeding through the morning streets of Florence, hearing the kind voice of the master as he expounded the beauties of Virgil and the eternal path on which man's feet were set.

Once more he relived that terrible scene which sent him shaking out into the street, never to return. Would the vision he had then beheld hold good? Had Ser Brunetto repented of his sin? From all the gossip it was doubtful. Then God, who was just as well as merciful, must cast that strange, mixed soul into the pit.

He stood in church and watched the body reverently lowered before the altar. It was thin and wasted, and the white beard was stained with yellow. It was clad in fur and scarlet, and covered with a handsome pall, as if they didn't know that the fled soul must shiver naked before God's judgment.

He said a little prayer for the dead man and for the boy who had been Dante Alighieri; then he turned away. Everyone agreed it had been a splendid funeral; the finest they had seen.

It was the last peaceful concourse of people in Florence for many a year.

Through his window Dante heard the constant tumult that convulsed Florence. Hardly a day passed without some clash of arms, some rush of partisans to the barricades. He tried to concentrate upon

the text before him. He was a philosopher, he said, and what had philosophers to do with this madness that had seized upon the people?

But the madness grew and the shouts gained in volume and became a roar.

The nobles fought among themselves—the Donati with the Cerchi, the Cavalcanti with the Buondelmonti, the Donati with the Cavalcanti, the Adimari with the Tosinghi. And the Guilds and people fought with all.

Men with arms shouldered through the streets and thrust the peaceful folk aside. Wherever the retainers of the rival nobles met, there were wounds and battle. Wherever the Leagues of the Popolo met the retainers, there were more wounds and more battles.

Giano della Bella rode the storm and sought to guide it in favour of the people. Though noble himself he saw clearly that the day of the feudal lords was over, that the rights of commerce and of trade must prevail. Therefore when Corso Donati slew a *popolani* in a scuffle with Simone Galastrone—even though that *popolani* was a groom in Simone's retinue—he caused him to be haled before the Podestà. The Podestà, lately come to Florence, let him off with a moderate fine. But Corso refused to pay the fine.

Whereupon the people rose in anger, stormed the Podestà's palace, and left it gutted and a wreck. The luckless Podestà saved himself by hasty flight.

Giano tried to halt the maddened populace. In their fury they turned on him with threatening lances and forced him to retire. The next day the Council met. They held the Podestà guiltless and placed the blame on Giano. The secret enemies of his reforms joined forces with the people whom he had tried to befriend. In despair he fled to France, and his life and property were held forfeit. This is the usual end to reformers.

But the Ordinances remained.

These Ordinances galled the proud spirit of the nobles. Especially they galled Corso Donati. He gathered his friends and kindred and staged a sudden uprising. But the great bells tolled alarm, and the merchants and the artisans rushed to arms. The great banner of the Gonfalonier whipped at their head. Seeing the force opposed to him, Corso withdrew.

His friends and connections among the Council gained him amnesty and even some small modification of the hated Ordinances.

Dante sat in his chamber and buried his nose deeper in his books.

Guido Cavalcanti took a pilgrimage to Toulouse, where the blessed

body of St. James lay enshrined. Why Guido took this pilgrimage was a puzzle to Dante. Guido, an Epicurean, a scoffer at things holy, suddenly devout? It didn't sound likely. Was he then in fear of his enemies in Florence? That also wasn't likely. Guido was not the man to run away from trouble.

Then a letter came. It seemed there was a certain lady called Mandetta at Toulouse. At first Dante chuckled, then he shook his head. He didn't like this use of holy places as a cloak for mundane lusts.

It was late summer when Guido returned. He came stalking in on Dante unannounced, knocking imperiously on the door until it was unbarred.

Dante raised a cry of gladness at the sight of him. "Welcome, my Guido! I had given up hope that you would ever return. How is the fair Mandetta?"

"Mandetta?" Guido made a gesture of disposal. "She passed the time a little while. But I didn't come to talk of women."

"No? What then?"

"Please bolt the door."

Dante stared. He noted now how agitated Guido was, and that his eyes glittered. He barred the door.

"You have bad news?"

"Bad enough. Your kinsman, Corso Donati, tried to assassinate me."

"No!"

"Yes. It was just as I reached the Tuscan border. I was riding the road unsuspecting with my two servants when a mounted band of bravoës spurred furiously from within a wood and ran straight towards me. Had not Stefano, my man, flung himself in front of me, I would have been run through." His eyes clouded. "Stefano died in my behalf. The delay gave me time to draw. With Giovanni, my other man, I fell upon the scoundrels. They broke and fled."

Dante shivered for his friend. "Praise God you are safe!" he exclaimed. "But how do you know they came from Corso?"

"Not all fled, my friend. One remained behind wounded. He confessed."

"It's hard to believe," whispered Dante. "I know Corso as a rash and dangerous man; but not as an assassin."

"Do you doubt my word?"

"No."

Guido paced the small room rapidly. His face twitched. "I'll have revenge on him," he said, in a low, passionate voice, "if I die for it."

Dante went to the table where he worked. It was strewn with books and tablets on which he made his notes. He gazed upon the open pages

a moment, as if to fix their accidental contents in his mind. Then he closed them all and placed them in order on the shelves. He stacked the tablets in a neat pile and put them carefully in a chest. Then he went to another chest, opened it and drew forth his sword and belt.

"What are you doing?" asked Guido, pausing in his strides.

Dante placed the belt around his middle and hung the sword at his side.

"I see," he said, with a sigh, "it is no time for books. It is a time for action. Come, let us go and find this Corso."

"Would you attack your own kinsman?" Guido inquired incredulously.

"He is kinsman by marriage only. And you, my Guido, are my friend."

It wasn't easy to find Corso Donati. At home his palace was a guarded fortress. On the streets he rode with a host of armed dependents.

"We must invoke the aid of Vieri de' Cerchi," said Dante.

"He's a new-rich magnate," said Guido with disdain. "He fights with money bags, not with arms."

"Nevertheless he is necessary if your revenge is not to languish. He hates the Donati and his faction grows rapidly in power. Furthermore, he is strong with the *popolani*. We must rejoin his party."

It took long argument before Guido consented. With the utmost reluctance he followed Dante to the ornate palace of the Cerchi.

The lame banker listened to Dante attentively while Guido glowered in silence. Vieri saw the glower, but he didn't mind. It pleased him that the great Cavalcanti clan had finally called on him for aid.

He stroked his chin reflectively. He put on an air of shock. "It was an infamous deed," he declared. He didn't see fit to tell them that he had on occasion tried his hand on this same game of assassination. "The power of the Donati must be destroyed. Until Corso, their head and leader, is slain or driven from the city, there'll be no peace in Florence. Messer Cavalcanti, I'll give you a picked group of men to follow you as escort wherever you go. Pray God you put an end to this arrogant man."

In the street Guido said joyfully, "For a banker he isn't bad. With Vieri's followers and my own we'll soon try conclusions with the scoundrel."

Dante frowned. "I think I was wrong to urge you to come to Cerchi. He intends to use you as a pawn to rid him cheaply of a rival."

"Bah! You're a great one for blowing hot and cold. Let him send his followers as he promised, and I care not what he plans."

Cerchi kept his promise. The next morning a band of armed men appeared before the house of the Cavalcanti and declared they were from Cerchi. Guido sent a messenger for Dante, armed his own men and sallied forth.

Dante took his sword and his horse, and rode from his house. Gemma cried: "*Now* what are you up to. First it was Beatrice, then it was philosophy, and now you go prancing away like any roistering gallant. I declare I can't begin to follow these marvellous transformations."

Dante didn't answer. It wouldn't do to tell her that he was engaged in war upon her kinsman.

He met the armed cavalcade on the Via di Calimala. It was a respectable force. Guido had only three of his own men with him, but the retainers of Cerchi numbered a full score.

Guido carried a short javelin. He waved it gaily at Dante. "Let us go in search of Corso. They say he's riding with his followers towards the Baptistry."

The horsemen made a great clatter as they rode down the narrow streets. The people they met pressed close against the walls and crossed themselves in fear. "More fighting!" they muttered. "Must we be forever plagued with these fierce nobles?"

As they rounded the Bishop's Palace a group of horsemen came the other way.

"There's the rascal!" called Guido fiercely, pointing his javelin. He put spurs to his horse and raced towards the oncoming men. So rapidly did he go that he was a hundred paces ahead before Dante came to himself.

"Wait, Guido!" he shouted. "Wait for the rest of us."

But Guido, spurred on by passion and revenge, didn't hear. With a groan Dante prodded his own horse into action. "Follow me!" he cried, and rode swiftly after his friend.

Up ahead he saw Corso rein his horse back in surprise. More than thirty were at his back.

Guido ran his horse against the horse of Corso. He flung his javelin. Corso threw himself quickly to one side so that he swayed and was almost unhorsed. The javelin grazed his hat and hit the stone wall beyond.

Simone, Corso's son, and Cecchino de' Bardi drew their swords and rushed to the rescue of their reeling leader. Then the others followed with a great shout.

Guido tugged at his own sword. It stuck in the belt. He wheeled his horse about and fled, the Donati in hot pursuit.

Dante turned in his saddle to see who had followed him. A cry of

despair burst from his lips. The three Cavalcanti had come a little way, then halted indecisively. The Cerchi had vanished. The street beyond was empty.

At the sight of the onrushing horde the Cavalcanti turned and galloped away.

Dante drew his sword and made for his fleeing friend. This was, he thought bitterly, far worse than the battle of Campaldino. Two against thirty!

The windows of the neighbouring houses opened. Men appeared magically in doorways. They all seemed partisans of the Donati. Missiles flung down from the windows. The men from the doorways tugged at the loose stones that paved the street and hurled them at the fleeing Cavalcanti. A great stone hit him on his sword arm. He staggered, righted himself and, the blood streaming from his wound, resumed his flight.

Simone and Cecchino were in the lead of the pursuit. They struck vainly at Guido but he outdistanced them. Then they struck at Dante as Guido passed him like the wind.

Dante parried the first blow. They came at him from both sides. Corso rode up in black anger. "Never mind Alighieri," he shouted to his son. "Follow Cavalcanti."

The troop almost trampled Dante as they galloped by. He stared at his sword and put it back at his side. He felt weak and shaken. Stones began to fall about him. The partisans of the Donati from the houses were beginning to concentrate on *him*. It was time to go—and quickly.

Dante reached home in safety. He sent a messenger to inquire of Guido. The Donati had chased him right to the door of the Cavalcanti Palace, where a sally of his own partisans had compelled them to retire. His arm was wounded, but there was no break in the bone.

Dante unbelted his sword and sat down to think. His pride was grievously hurt. Corso Donati had perhaps saved his life. Was it because he was a kinsman or because he disdained him as of no importance? Dante resented either supposition. He scorned the magnanimity and he shook with anger at the disdain. He saw one thing clearly. There must be war between them from now on. Corso was not a man to forget, even though he had passed him by this once. Neither was Dante one who had no memory.

Vieri de' Cerchi was profuse with apologies. He had dismissed his men in disgrace for their cowardice, he said. He was hiring others who feared neither God nor the devil. In the meantime let them not worry. If any complaint should be lodged for their assault, he'd see to it personally that it would go no further.

Dante listened in silence and came away. Guido was ill with a frustrated passion that was far worse than his wound.

"I've been reflecting on the matter, my Guido. I've come to a series of conclusions."

"Spoken like a schoolman. Major premise, minor premise, neat conclusions neatly tabbed." Guido stared bitterly at his bandaged arm. "And what may these conclusions be, my syllogistic friend?"

"Firstly," said Dante unperturbed, "that personal violence has failed."

"My own arm is a better logician than you."

"Secondly," Dante went on, unheeding, "that the very act of violence is a denial of the existence of the state. The state, to which all men must adhere, proves its worth only when it is able to maintain peace and orderly government. But in Florence today there is no peace and no orderly government. Nor can there be as long as the Donati, as long as you, as long as the Cerchi and the Adimari are privileged to fight their private battles in the street. But you will continue to fight your private battles as long as there is no strong, just government to adjudicate your quarrels and punish infringements of the common peace, such as Corso's attempt at your assassination."

Guido listened with growing amazement. "You've become something of a pedant, my friend," he said sarcastically. "Florence is no Augustinian City of God. Where, if I may inquire, is this strong, just government? In the rabble of tradesmen we now have in office?"

Dante did not permit himself to be set aside by mockery. He was deeply in earnest. "If we have such a rabble, it is our own fault. We—the so-called men of intelligence and good will—have remained sneeringly aloof. We sulk because the mere fact that we are nobles doesn't give us power forthwith. We must henceforth seek office and apply our minds to the business of government."

"Now I know your books have addled your wits. Have you forgotten the Ordinances? No man who is not an accredited member of a Guild may seek an office."

"I've not forgotten. Until we take the reins and change the law, we must obey."

"Well, then——"

"We'll join a Guild."

Guido jumped up from his seat. He forgot the pain in his arm.

"Are you jesting, Dante? You, a noble, join a Guild? Even your father demeaned himself by becoming a notary, and that is the least greasy of all the trades. But you're no notary. Perchance," he sneered, "you'll become a butcher and hack at carcasses, or a blacksmith and shoe my horses for me."

"It is *you* who see fit to jest, Guido. I've thought it over carefully. I intend to seek enrollment among the apothecaries."

Guido fell back overwhelmed. "I can see you mixing toad's dung and the sloughed skins of snakes, or whatever they use in their hellish concoctions."

Dante smiled. "They deal also in books, and those who practise the art of painting are attached to them. I read books and on occasion I practise drawing."

"You're still mad."

"To see further than one's nose is not to be mad. I wish you to do the same."

"Never! I'm a Cavalcanti. Every noble in Florence would consider me a renegade."

"The more fools they. Then I shall be a renegade alone."

At first the Guild of Apothecaries viewed the application of Dante Alighieri with suspicion. What was the meaning of this strange desire on the part of one who held himself a noble to become a member of their Art? There was lengthy discussion. It was pointed out by those in favour that Alighiero Alighieri had belonged to the Guild of Notaries. It was further pointed out that the Alighieri had never been as arrogant or factious as the greater houses. It was deftly insinuated that there was a certain flattery in this humble request. At length, after much reluctance and by a small majority, Dante Alighieri was duly enrolled in the Guild of Apothecaries.

The news became a minor sensation in Florence. The *popolani* hailed his accession as the first breach in the disdainful ranks of the nobility. The nobility treated him as a renegade and a seeker after popular favour. True, they fought among themselves; but they closed their ranks compactly against any lesser folk. They comforted themselves with the fact that the Alighieri clan was small and unimportant, and couldn't trace its ancestry further back than a hundred and fifty years.

Corso passed him in the street. "I forgave your assault," he said, with scorn, "because you were married to my kinswoman. Had I known you would descend so low, I'd have set my meanest retainer upon you with a stick."

Dante forgot he was now a man of peace and grasped fiercely at his sword. But Corso had already ridden off, leaving his mockery behind to sting and rankle.

Dante curbed his fury with a strong effort of the will. "I must learn," he reflected, "not to be swayed by scorn or insults. The peace of Florence and the end I seek are worth a few hard words. There has been enough bloodshed."

Gemma's reaction was harder to bear. She was again with child and somewhat swollen. "I am undone," she cried, and the tears blubbered her face. "I've married a man without principle and without pride. I could have borne your assault on my noble cousin—though why you allied yourself with the Cavalcanti against my family is beyond me. But this is too much. An apothecary, no less! My friends will no longer have anything to do with me. The wife of the apothecary! My poor children, your father will give you a fine inheritance!"

He was reduced to bidding her be silent and seeking refuge in his sanctuary. There he prayed for guidance. Without pride, was he? He, whose besetting sin was pride! For the first time in several years he called upon Beatrice for aid. But her face remained obscure, as though she, too, were offended at his defection. He prayed to his second lady, Philosophy. She appeared to him in a fair and seemly form. Her gaze touched him gently. He rose, comforted. Was it not the philosopher's meed to cast aside the idle taunts of men—yea, even of his own wife?

There were compensations. At one of the meetings of the Guild, which he attended diligently, he met a young artist. The boy was barely twenty and a squat, burly fellow of common peasant stock. He was given to vulgar jests and he spoke plainly whatever was on his mind, heedless of place or circumstance. But he was a merry fellow and good-natured, and his ugly countenance broke into a curious glow when the talk turned towards the art of painting.

His name was Giotto.

Giotto was inordinately pleased when this new member of the Guild deigned to speak to him. Dante was eleven years older and a noble. The youth poured out his dreams and ambitions readily. He had been born in the country district of Vespignano and had early shown a talent for drawing. As a boy of ten he came to Florence and became a pupil of the renowned Cimabue. With great glee he narrated how, one day, he had secretly painted a fly on the nose of one of the figures the master had just finished. When Cimabue returned to the studio, he perceived the fly. With an angry gesture he tried to brush it off, thinking it real. It was only when the boy exploded into laughter that he desisted. He became more angry. "You are on the wrong path, little Giotto," he said. "The sacred art of painting does not consist in the slavish imitation of nature. That is mere vulgarity. It is irreverent to depict the angels of Heaven and the most gracious Madonna with low sweeps of brush and curving sensualities. Your strokes should be severe and loftily angular." He made no mention of the desecration of his painting.

"But I don't agree with him, Messer Alighieri," protested Giotto, in telling the tale. "There is beauty in the natural line and flow of face

and garment. Nor is it imitation. I try to compose my pictures." He showed some drawings eagerly. "What do you think?"

Dante turned them over in silence. Accustomed as he was to the stylized severity of Cimabue's work, he didn't quite know what to say at these free-flowing, subtle designs. The angles seemed about to fly directly from the paper, and the saints showed human passion in every lineament. But the more he studied them, the more his own stiff drawings seemed lifeless and dull.

"If that is your bent, Giotto," he said finally, "let no one dissuade you. Not even Cimabue." He, too, had permitted no one to dissuade him.

He set to work in his own field. He attended the meetings of the Guild assiduously. He sought to gain the confidence of those members who were still suspicious of his views. He spoke frequently. He insisted on the necessity for peace among themselves if Florence were to become great and powerful. The fault, he declared, was in the present government that permitted factions to develop and paralyse its power.

By the end of the year he had succeeded in his initial aim. He was elected from his Guild to the Council of the Hundred. Again his tone was moderate and always on the side of peace and conciliation.

Guido said: "I hear you're making a name for yourself among the rabble with your tongue."

"I would advise you to do the same."

"I'd rather wield my sword," retorted Guido, in some disdain.

But Dante hewed steadily to his chosen course. He accepted whatever commissions were offered him and performed them well and conscientiously. He held himself aloof from the squabbles and affrays that burst out with fatal regularity among the nobles. He tried to keep himself as much aloof from the factions that rent the city into many pieces and penetrated into the Council of One Hundred. He remained a Guelph, naturally, since there was no room for a Ghibelline in Florence. But he sought no fortune for himself from the fact, nor did he lower himself to use his position for private vendetta. He seemed even to have forgotten the insult that Corso had put upon him. When the Donati and the Cerchi, more hateful to each other than ever, met at a funeral and drew their swords, he was among the first to intercede and stop them. He even voted in the Council against a punishment for the disturbance of the peace, since the punishment was directed solely against the Donati—though the Cerchi had been equally at fault.

Then, suddenly, and before men's minds were quite prepared for it, the year of 1300 burst upon them, and the beginning of a new century.

Pope Boniface VIII declared it a year of Jubilee and promised remission of all sins to those who undertook the pilgrimage to Rome.

A wave of enthusiasm flowed over Europe. The wave engulfed Florence and momentarily swept away the feuds that had tormented it so long. It was a time to pause and reflect. It was a time to begin considering the state of their immortal souls. Thirteen hundred years before, the Son of Man had come to earth to bring salvation. But what salvation had there been? This was the time, they said, to start afresh. The new century unfolded like a clean scroll of parchment. In Rome there was absolution for all that had gone before.

"On to Rome!" raised the cry.

From every town in Europe, from every village and hamlet, men and women hung scripts at their sides, took the pilgrim's staff, and moved towards Rome. The shoemakers downed their awls and the artisans their tools. The peasant left his plough in the field and the merchant his wares. Even the nobles put aside their swords and took up the peaceful staff.

Dante was profoundly moved by the general contagion. He, too, had much on which to pause and reflect. His sins were many and for the work ahead he required a soul washed clean and a mind free from evil.

Besides, he had never been to Rome.

He asked Guido to join him on the pilgrimage. Guido laughed. "It's all flummery," he said. "What sins I have are mine, and mine alone. No one can take them from me with a laying on of hands or a formula of words."

"How can you speak such sacrilege?" demanded Dante indignantly. "Didn't Christ give the keys to Peter, and Peter to Rome? Hasn't the Pope the power to loosen and absolve?"

"Stuff!" Guido retorted inelegantly.

Dante quit him, troubled. He was, he reflected, imperilling his own soul by association with such an arrant infidel. Well, he would think about that later.

He prepared his horse and his gear, kissed Gemma lightly, his three small children more fervently, and departed. Gemma was pregnant again. She breeds like a mare, he thought. Well, a goodly number of children were a comfort to a man when he was old. Not that he was old. He was thirty-five, in the very middle of life.

CHAPTER XII

In the plenitude of Apostolic Authority, we grant to all who, being truly penitent, visit these basilicas in this present year, and in each succeeding hundredth year, not only a full and copious, but the most full pardon of all their sins.

Bull of Boniface VIII

It was the springtime of the year and all nature seemed aquiver with a devout, religious gaiety. The little flowers yearned upward from their mother soil and spread their petals in adoration of their Father. The trees bedecked themselves in tenderest green to behold the coming Bridegroom. Nightly the dew rose in blissful exhalation, and daily the sun proclaimed with passion the glories of the first creation. From every blowing bush the birds sang like an angel chorus; even the timid hares twitched fearless noses at the passage of the enemy, man.

For the first time for years Dante Alighieri was at peace. His soul expanded in the light air; his pride and fierce despairs fell from him like sloughs of skin and moulting chrysalis. Family, city, squabbles, clash of arms, politics, learned books seemed infinitely remote in the joyous presence of the ever-living God. The very faces of the pilgrims who moved along the long ribbon of road seemed pure and washed from early sin.

"Poor Guido!" he reflected, "how can he disbelieve these testimonies of the truth?" He felt a vast pity for his friend whose reason denied his soul and writhed in torment with the denial. He bowed his head in humble praise, and his new-found humility was surpassing sweet.

His horse ambled quietly along. Each crossroad poured in its endless stream of pilgrims, whose faces turned always towards the south, towards the Eternal City. They came from every northern town in Italy, from Florence and Siena, from Padua and Pisa, from Fiesole and Lucca. They came from beyond the Alps, travel-stained, foot-weary from many days of journeying. Dark-haired, bright-eyed men of Provence; strange, blond giants from Germany; small, swarthy Hungarians; and outlandish Poles. They rode on horseback, in companies or alone; they plodded on foot, with stuffed bags slung over their shoulders; they jounced in carts drawn by patient oxen. Strange tongues commingled and made a vast droning sound like the swarm of many hives of bees. Friars in corded smocks, sturdy on naked feet, knights glittering in peaceful robes, red-jacketed messengers, spurring through the dense-moving mass, dyers with their bare arms stained

green and purple, merchants portly and sedate, women in bright scarlet, artisans in jerkins and long hose, rich and poor, noble and peasant, all going to Rome, all animated for the once with a common blessed purpose.

Dante breathed in the varied sights and sounds. His senses were like sponges, his brain a tablet on which all things wrote themselves. Man was a pilgrim in eternity, and each evanescent movement, each trick of face and gesture was itself eternal.

It was Easter Eve when they came to Rome. The sun slanted in long lines across the road. It glittered their dusty clothes into innumerable pin points of gold. They struggled up the last rise of ground, knowing that their goal was near. Ahead, as each band in the endless train surmounted the crest, shouts bore faintly back along the dimming day. Dante hurried his pace. The tired pilgrims almost broke into a run.

"In exitu Israel de Aegypto," whispered Dante reverently.

Rome lay before him on its many hills. The westering sun touched its jumbled towers, castles, and basilicas into a flame of glory. Like a veritable City of God it seemed, ablaze with light. It reached up from a vast, surrounding plain, girt in its ancient walls; and the yellow Tiber rolled darkly by.

Obeying a sudden impulse Dante dismounted and knelt in the narrow, crowded road. On all sides the pilgrims went down on their knees—men of many lands, noble and burgher, peasant and artisan. A great wind swept them, and a sigh that broke into an exultant shout.

"Rome! Rome!" they shouted. A Franciscan began to pray. "St. Peter and St. Paul, have mercy!" The prayer rose quiet and healing. They bowed their heads and prayed with him. The tears sprang to Dante's eyes.

Then they pressed on eagerly, in haste. But it was twilight when they reached the banks of the Tiber. A human stream flowed out of Rome, thick and burdened, to meet the counter-stream flowing in. Pilgrims who had been in Rome the fifteen days required for absolution, going home. They wore their signs and medals proudly, and they were impatient to be back to distant town and village.

The two streams choked the road. Horse rubbed against horse, and hooves came down to find a weary foot beneath. But there were no cries of anger or insulting exhortations. There were requests for humble pardon, prayers for forgiveness at unwitting jostling.

"It is indeed a City of God," thought Dante in amazement.

Their feet strode on the Claudian Way, ancient road of the Roman legions. Houses grew on either side, thicker and thicker. The Castle of Sant' Angelo loomed black in the shadows. Torches appeared. They

cast their sputtering glow before the houses. Men stood in front of each, crying: "Rest ye, weary pilgrims, for the night. Here is food and shelter. In Rome it is crowded and accommodations scarce. Take heed and enter."

Pilgrims turned aside, hearkening to the warnings. But Dante pushed on. He was too near to Rome to sleep outside its sacred walls.

The press grew heavier. The Tiber was a yellow serpent, broad and twisting in the dusk. But two lines of torches made a passage across the river. Two lines, sputtering and blazing on the Bridge of Sant' Angelo.

"The press will be so dense across, coming and going," thought Dante, "there'll be trampling and perhaps a giving way into the river." Almost he was tempted to heed the cries and sojourn for the night.

But, as he came slowly to the bridge, he stared in wondering amazement. A wooden barrier stretched down the long expanse of bridge, dividing it in two. On one side those entering into Rome moved in ordered array; on the other, in a ceaseless stream, went those who wished to leave.

"It is a miracle," he said piously to his neighbour. "The one who thought of this scheme was inspired by God."

"Eh, what did you say?" the man asked in Latin.

Dante shifted to the common tongue, repeating his remark. He added: "I'm from Florence. Once the Ponte Vecchio, which spans the Arno, was so overladen with the crush of people struggling against each other to pass that it collapsed, and many were drowned."

"I'm from London. We have the same difficulty over the Thames. I'll have to make a note of this."

"How many do you think are now in Rome?"

"They say there are two hundred thousand strangers always within the gates, and more coming and going."

"It might have been wiser to have taken lodging outside."

"I'm beginning to think so myself."

But on the other side, at the gate, a line of men armed with official staffs stared attentively into the faces of the incoming pilgrims.

"This way, men of Genoa."

"Come to me, good countrymen of Spain."

"Ho, ye English, I bid you welcome."

"People of Naples, I am your guide."

A man with a staff hastened towards Dante. He bowed politely. "Welcome, Messer Alighieri; you are most welcome to Rome. If you wish, I'll show you where the Florentines forgather, and you can have excellent accommodations for yourself and your horse."

"Thank you," said Dante gratefully. "Who are you?"

"I'm Ugolino, of the Sesto of Oltrarno. I've been deputed by the authorities to act as guide for my fellow-Florentines."

"It's a marvellous arrangement, Ugolino." Everything was marvellous about this city of Rome. It pleased him also that Ugolino had so readily recognized him.

The inn to which he was led was crowded, and the small room he was given already held three other Florentines. But he was used to such crowding, and slept well. The food was good, and his horse had been properly stabled.

The dawn had barely broken over the jumbled city when he arose. His fellow room-mates were still sprawled on the floor in snoring sleep. He didn't know them. By their clothes they seemed artisans. Tanners, from their tintured arms and the smell of them.

He avoided waking them. He had no desire for their company or their speech. He wished to see Rome by himself and with his thoughts untouched. After a simple, hurried toilet he went down into the smoky kitchen. The innkeeper's wife sleepily got him some food. When he had eaten and wished to go out, she barred his way. Her hand was extended.

"That will be a *gross tournois* for a night's lodging for yourself and your steed, Messer."

Dante stared. "That is a fabulous sum, my good woman. Besides, I intend to stay for fifteen days. Why do you seek payment now?"

"It is the Roman custom," she replied. Her voice was hoarse and tired. "We collect each day. There is no other way of keeping track of all the comings and goings. As for the price, Messer, it is fixed. This is the Jubilee."

"I see." Dante grimaced. "There is much profit in the Jubilee."

"The next is a hundred years off." She said it as if that explained everything.

Dante paid her from his purse. Some of the brightness was chipped from the brotherhood of man. But when he emerged into the narrow street, already laden with its swarm of pilgrims, his mood changed and his eagerness returned.

"Almighty Rome!" he whispered. "Home and fount of Church and Empire! What wonderful sights have you witnessed! What great deeds have sprung from your loins! What bliss it is to breathe your air!"

The air, in truth, stank somewhat. It was filled with the odour of decay, with slops and pig excrement underfoot, with the rank smell of thousands of close-pressed people. But Dante, in his exaltation, paid no heed to this small discrepancy. He started to walk.

It was Easter morning, the glorious morning of the Resurrection. The sun was warm and golden between the roofs. An air of anticipation

hung over the ancient city. It roused itself like an aged lady who had witnessed many cycles of change and many mornings, but who hoped each morning for a miracle to happen—the miracle of returning youth.

His first thought was to ascend the steps of St. Peter. He inquired the way.

"Just follow the crowd," he was told. "Everyone goes there on Easter morning."

The streets to the basilica were narrow and tortuous; even more so than at Florence. At every corner, in every doorway, brass-voiced hawkers yelled their wares of relics, amulets, and the images of saints. The people rushed to buy.

"The veritable tooth of St. Peter!"

"Behold the nail that pierced the blessed foot of the Saviour! A bargain at two gold florins."

"The kerchief of St. Anne!"

"The thigh-bone of St. Anthony!"

"Would you pass by this vial of water from the Sea of Galilee?"

Dante passed it by. There seemed too many relics, and the prices were too low.

His heart beat rapidly as he approached the ancient church. On its stone stairs hundreds of pilgrims pulled themselves up, step by step, on their knees. Dante joined them.

Within the vestibule, guarded by monks, was the tomb of St. Peter. Dante bent before the sacred shrine. He wished to pray and meditate in the presence of the Apostle; but the hordes pushed him on. He went to the basilica of St. Paul.

Here the press was even greater. The vision of the Apocalypse seemed to blazon from every cranny of the lofty vault. But in front of the altar stood two clerics. They held wooden rakes in their hands and there arose a mighty clink of metal.

He pushed through the surrounding throng to see what might be the matter. From everywhere hands outstretched and threw coins upon the altar, crying: "Behold our offerings, blessed saint, and grant us of thy intercession!"

The coins tumbled and made a noise like hailstones on a roof. As they fell, the clerics raked them into bags; as they raked, they fell anew.

Overmastered, Dante threw a silver florin upon the altar. Someone next to him said ironically: "Pope Boniface is lucky. Now he can replenish all the gold he poured out in the cursed Sicilian wars and buy his way with the Roman mob."

Dante turned quickly; but the speaker, suddenly afraid, shrank back into the crowd.

Someone else said, "Are you going to the pageant?"

"What pageant?"

"Don't you know? The Pope is causing his nephew, Roffred, to be knighted this afternoon. Right on the steps of St. Peter. All the lords and princes of Christendom will be present."

"On the steps of St. Peter?" inquired Dante, taken aback. "Isn't that an unseemly place for a secular ceremony like a knighting?"

His informant stared pityingly at him. "I see you're not a Roman. It's fortunate the tomb of our Lord is in Jerusalem instead of Rome. *Nothing* is too holy for the family of Caetani."

"Yes," interjected another, "didn't he say that all was lawfully his which belonged to the Church? He might have added it was his kinsfolk's, too."

Dante went away, troubled. Was it for such nepotism that Peter had bestowed the keys? He had heard enough of Pope Boniface in Florence. But it was chiefly in connection with his thirst for power and arrogance; not for his simony and greed for gold.

He determined he would not attend the knighting, though indeed every prince and potentate in the world were there.

As he walked down the steep thoroughfare, a cavalcade clattered behind him so swiftly that he barely darted into a doorway to avoid being overridden.

It was obviously the retinue of a person of considerable importance; the knights who led the way were in armour and bore lances, though war-like weapons were forbidden in Rome during the Jubilee. In the middle of their ranks rode a tall, rather thickset man, heavy-featured and coarsely handsome. He looked neither to the right nor to the left.

When they were gone, Dante stepped out into the street.

"Who was that?" he asked a man who passed.

"That? Charles of Valois, brother of the king of France. They say he is here privately on business with the Pope." The man stared after the retreating cavalcade and spat. "We've had enough of the Pope's business," he added bitterly.

Dante spent the next few days roaming through the streets of the ancient city. His nose quivered at every ruin, his heart stopped before every shattered column. Every spot was sacred; every cowpath redolent with memories. Here perhaps Caesar marched, after he had crossed the Rubicon; there, hidden now by clambering vineyards, was the Forum where the sages of the Senate administered the law. Here had sped Lucrece's woe under the brutal Tarquin hand; there Cicero meditated his flaming speeches against the traitor, Catiline. Under that arch, perhaps, had Titus passed triumphant after justice unjustly rendered for the just injustice done to Christ.

The thronging shades overwhelmed him. The fifteen days he had neant to spend in Rome—sufficient for his absolution—were not enough. He wished a lifetime for communion with the universal past.

Yet everywhere he was astounded by the wrack and ruin. All was neglected and crumbling to decay. The great towers of the Colonna and the Orsini threatened each other, like their holders, across shambles of broken stones and fields as wild and desolate as any in Tuscany. The doors of dwellings were barred with massive chains, as if to guard from human wolves that preyed the labyrinth of streets. The baths and circuses were under marsh, and the walls of the basilicas were pitted with sped arrow bolts. Mountains of rubbish lay untended next the broken Pantheon, and the castles rose abrupt from fields where once had been the six-storey structures of the Empire.

Would that golden age ever come which Virgil had promised in prophetic lines? Would Rome rise once more as the head of Universal Empire, as it was now the head of Universal Church? It must! he cried fiercely. It shall! he said with quiet conviction.

On Friday he went to St. Peter. The great basilica was black with pilgrims. In solemn ceremony the Veronica appeared, uplifted for all to see. At the sight of the miraculous napkin, on which Dante saw plainly the distinct impress of the blessed agony of Jesus Christ, the vast concourse fell on its knees and worshipped.

As Dante arose, he heard someone say in an eager whisper: "Messer Alighieri! Do my eyes deceive me?"

He turned and beheld young Giotto, the painter, all smiles and beaming.

"Giotto!" He was pleased. "Methinks all Florence is here."

The painter grinned amiably. "I came yesterday. There were still a good many left in town."

A man stood next to him. "It would have been better had they really come. Our Florentines are too provincial. Here they would find much to ponder on."

Dante was struck with the observation. It was close to his own thinking. He surveyed the man. He was young and of a sober, inquiring visage not usual in the young. His long *gabbano* was grey and without ornament.

"That is a just remark," he approved. "You are a Florentine?"

The young man smiled. "I am neighbour to you in the Porta San Piero, Messer Alighieri. I am Giovanni Villani."

"I am sorry not to have known you, Messer Villani," said Dante, mortified.

"Plain Giovanni," answered the young man with a proud humbleness. "I don't come of knightly family."

"Knightliness is wherever there is virtue. But what have been the fruit of your ponderings?"

Villani's eyes kindled. "At first, beholding these great and ancient things, I thought that some day I might write concerning them. Now I'm not so sure. Rome has declined. Why write of the dying? I'd rather write of the living, of that which is rising."

"For example?"

The young man thought a while. "Perhaps of our native city, Florence. Yes," he said with decision. "I shall compose a chronicle of Florence."

"I'm certain it will be a good chronicle," Dante said politely. "I hope you'll find room in it for my humble name."

"And mine," laughed Giotto. "But enough of chronicles, and more of me! Have you heard the great news?"

"Not a whit."

The artist's face was lively with pleasure. "I've received my first real commission. I'm to paint a *Paradiso* over the altar in the chapel of the Podestà!"

"That is splendid, Giotto! I expect you to surpass even Cimabue."

There was no false modesty about the painter. "I shall," he said with simple conviction. "And even if this boorish Giovanni hesitates about placing you in his chronicle, I shall give you permanence. You shall be a saint in the very forefront of the picture." He gazed critically at Dante's head. Then he nodded. "It is a good head; just what I wish for a saint."

Giotto left for Florence the following day. He had, he explained, to start at once on the composition of his altar piece. His whole future career depended on it. Villani disappeared, too. For all his decision, he was shy of the company of Messer Alighieri, noble and member of the Council. Dante was alone again.

He didn't mind. He explored Rome. Each morning he went to St. Peter's and prayed with a multitude of pilgrims. Then he was free to wander.

One day he climbed to the Pantheon and sat quietly amidst its ruins. Here, he meditated, was the true Rome of the ancients. Here the Empire gathered to itself all the gods of its far-flung peoples. Apollo and great Jove, the Great Mother, Cybele, Astarte, Isis, and the military Mithras—all except the one *true* God. Was it, he wondered, because He would not have brooked the presence of these false deities? Was it because the true Faith required the blood of martyrs and the anguish of persecution to cement it firmly in the structure of the Empire?

"It's a good place to invoke the Muses, sir," a voice spoke behind him. "I come here quite often to polish off my verses. The Roman people are an infernal noisy lot."

Dante started. He had thought himself alone. He turned.

The speaker was seated on a broken fragment of a column. His legs were comfortably crossed and a long finger was laid inquisitively along a curved beak of a nose. His black eyes, for all their bold brilliance, had a glint of merry humour in them as they studied Dante. He appeared about Dante's own age.

"Forgive me for my start," said Dante courteously. "I didn't know anyone else was here. You are a poet?"

"A versifier, rather. I'm not one of your epic poets who write of wars and knights and feats of arms. My taste is more modest. I prefer to discourse on a pretty face and a good meal, and to throw in a bit of satire now and then."

"Each to his taste. But you'd hardly need to invoke the Muses for *that*."

"Why not? What were the Muses but a band of good-looking women? And what pleases a pretty woman more than a well-turned phrase about her looks? You can tell her anything you wish as long as you praise her beauty."

"But the Muses weren't mere pretty women. They were goddesses and devoted to the ideal, the noble."

"It amuses me," the man said slyly, "to hear a Christian speak of them as goddesses."

Dante flushed. "It's a manner of speech. Then you aren't——?"

"A Christian? No. I'm a Jew." He laughed heartily. "I thought it was written all over my face."

Dante gazed at him curiously. He had met Jews in Florence and in the other Tuscan cities. But they were chiefly money-changers or pedlars. He hadn't paid much attention to them. This fellow seemed a different sort. He didn't cringe respectfully, he spoke of the Muses on the most familiar terms, and he was a poet.

The man noted his look. "Oh, I haven't horns or a tail," he said with a waggish air, "if that's what you're looking for. But then, we Jews really gave you your God."

"And disowned him since."

"Our rabbis think differently," he retorted with an indifferent smile. "But I don't bother my head much about such matters. I leave them to the theologians on both sides to get heated about. Give me a bottle of wine, a neat ankle, and a chance to scribble some verse, and I'm satisfied."

Why, he might just as well be a Christian, thought Dante, not

noting the incongruity. He was thinking of Cecco, of Lapo and, in a different way, of Guido.

He became interested in this strange Jew. "But I thought that all Jews—" he began.

"Were devout psalm-singers? Not a bit. We have our infidels the same as you." He grinned. "And our rabbis thunder at us in synagogue just as much as do your Christian priests. Oh, I studied the Bible and the Talmud like all Jewish youngsters; but what remains in my memory chiefly are the erotic passages. Like the Song of Solomon, for example."

"The Song is a great parable," Dante said indignantly. "It deals with the Church that is to come."

"Parable or no parable, it's free and easy in its speech. It's almost as good as Ovid. But we've been talking away at a great rate without knowing who we are. I'm Immanuel ben Solomon, citizen of Rome. *Ben*," he explained, "means *son of*."

Dante hesitated. He didn't know whether he wished to converse further with this Jew. But the man was amazingly different, and his easy frankness had a likable quality about it.

"I'm Dante Alighieri of Florence," he said.

Immanuel's face changed. He jumped up from his perch and came over eagerly. "Not the Alighieri," he exclaimed, "who wrote 'Ladies that have intelligence in love'? Or 'Love, that discourses in my thoughts,' which Casella set to music?"

"The same," admitted Dante. There was a warm glow within him.

"Why, this is luck! I had hoped some day to journey to Florence especially to meet you. I sing your songs all the time. I study them as a text, along with Ovid and Horace. But my own little verses," he added ruefully, "don't measure up to yours."

Dante felt a sudden liking for the man. "Perhaps you're being modest," he suggested. "I'd like to hear one or two."

"I modest?" chuckled Immanuel. "You should hear what my outraged compatriots say of me. But you wouldn't understand them. They're in Hebrew."

"Oh! Can't you translate one?"

"It wouldn't sound the same." He thought a moment. "Well, here goes." He recited in a remarkably musical voice, much different from his slightly hoarse, tart speaking tones.

*"Her eyes are stars, stolen by day
And restored to heaven by night."*

"Why, they're lovely," said Dante warmly, when he had finished

the several stanzas. "But I thought you said you didn't invoke the ideal in woman."

Immanuel grinned. "I just tossed that off to see if I could do it. It isn't my usual style. Here's one that is."

The man was an actor. He changed his voice to suit. His mobile countenance became a mask of Pan. His voice chuckled and jeered.

The fool, he declaimed, will marry a beautiful wife and be betrayed. The wise man takes an ugly one and is safe in the knowledge that she will be faithful. With a calm mind he may then devote himself wholly to the most beautiful bride of all, which is Wisdom.

"There!" he said defiantly, "what do you think of that?"

"It's clever," Dante laughed. He remembered the interchange between himself and Forese. "I've done some in the same manner myself; and not nearly as good."

Immanuel was gratified. "I was afraid you were going to discourse severely on the high mission of poetry," he said. "Look, I'm starved! It's past my meal-time, and I account that a major sin. You'd favour me if you would come to my house and share my meal."

Dante hesitated. *He* enter the house of a Jew? Wasn't that, too, in the nature of a sin? Immanuel's face changed. It became more like the face of those Jews he had known. Beneath his ironic, man-of-the-world exterior the sensitiveness of the oppressed showed distinctly.

"I'd be delighted," said Dante quickly.

"Good!" Immanuel beamed again. With a twisted smile he remarked: "One never knows how a well-meant invitation will be taken by a Christian. He'll speak to you in the market-place and chat with you in the street. But come to your home——!"

Dante rose. "It will be a pleasure. And I just remembered, too, how hungry I am."

Immanuel took his new friend into a quarter which Dante, in all his explorations of Rome, had not entered. It was the Jewish quarter. The streets were narrower and more crooked than even the narrow, crooked streets of the rest of Rome. The people were different, too. Dante stared from side to side. He seemed to have moved suddenly into an Oriental land.

The men shuffled by in long, black caftans, and invariably they wore black skull-caps on their curly, unshorn hair. Their beards were long and also unshorn. They stared suspiciously at the Christian who had invaded their precincts. Dante had a strange feeling that they mumbled in their beards behind him. Their glances at Immanuel were hardly less hostile.

"They call me the *goy*," Immanuel said carelessly. "That means a

gentile. The rabbis talk seriously of excommunicating me. I don't attend synagogue often enough to suit them. But here we are."

Dante looked askance at the low, mean house on the narrow, mean street. Immanuel caught the glance and smiled quietly to himself. He knocked on the door.

A servant opened. His dress was Moorish and his face swarthy. He bowed low to his master and stared fiercely at Dante. Immanuel spoke to him sharply in a strange tongue, and the man bowed again and stood aside.

"I'm in the hands of the infidels," thought Dante. "A Jewish host and a Saracen slave." Strange stories he had heard flitted through his mind. How Jews lured unsuspecting Christians into their dens and slew them. They needed Christian blood, it was averred, to make the unleavened bread they used on their Easter. Why, it must be their Easter now! Dante felt for his sword. Then he remembered—he didn't carry it in Rome. He began to feel sorry that he had come.

If Immanuel knew what was passing in the mind of his guest, he gave no sign.

He led the way through a low, mean hallway lit by a single candle in a sconce. At the end of the hall hung a heavy curtain, barring further way.

He thrust it aside. He turned and smiled. "Enter my humble abode," he invited.

Dante had to confess that his heart's beat was much above normal. But it was too late to retreat. Behind him was the Saracen slave. In front was——

He put a bold face on it and went in.

His first emotion was one of wary fear. His second gave vent in a gasp of surprise.

The room before him had no relation to the hall behind, or to the outward seeming of the house. It was fabulous. The walls were covered with red silk hangings of the finest texture. The floor was carpeted with soft, rare rugs into which his feet sank soundlessly. The chairs were carved and fitted with gold brocade. The long table gleamed with white linen, and the dishes, arranged as for a banquet, were of silver and a strange glazed pottery the like of which he'd never seen. Everything was lavish, yet in taste.

A woman rose from a divan on their entrance. She came towards them. "You're late, Immanuel. I was getting worried. In these days of Christian festival it isn't safe to go wandering——" She saw the stranger and stopped abruptly.

"Rome's the safest place in the world, Rebecca," said Immanuel. "You needn't fear. This is Messer Alighieri. He will eat with us."

"He is welcome." Her salutation was graceful, self-possessed.

Dante bowed. He was afraid he had too frankly stared. This Jewess was a mere girl and beautiful. Her dark eyes were soft and lustrous, and her shining black hair was wound in thick strands to fall in a low curve over her forehead.

Immanuel noted his look of inquiry. He began to laugh. He addressed himself to Rebecca. "Our guest," he explained, "was kind enough to listen to one of my poems. You know, the one about the wise man and his wife. I can read his thoughts as plain as day. He's wondering what I'm doing with such a beautiful wife. You *are* beautiful, you know. But there, I don't need to tell you that."

The blood rose darkly under her skin. She lowered her eyes.

Immanuel turned to Dante. "Rebecca is my sister, Messer Alighieri. I did better than my words. I'm a bachelor."

"No doubt a good many young men in Rome praise God regularly she is only your sister," Dante said gallantly.

Immanuel sobered and scowled. "Not as many as you think. We aren't orthodox in our religion. But come, let us to the table."

The meal was strange to Dante, but delicious. Rebecca served them, and so did an older woman who appeared from the rear. The men talked.

Dante found his host a widely read man. He was conversant with all the Latins, and he quoted easily from Greeks whom Dante barely knew by name. When Dante expressed surprise, he explained: "We Jews know the Greek writers through Syriac translations. We have most of Plato, of whom you Latins have only a wretched fragment of the *Timaeus*. We have Lucian, the satirist, Menander, the comic dramatist, Philo the philosopher, who was a Jew by birth but a Greek in spirit. We had the whole of Aristotle, you know, long before he came to you."

Dante kindled. "It would be a marvellous thing if all these poets and philosophers were rendered into Latin. Why don't you do it, Immanuel?"

He shrugged. "I've played with the idea at times. But it means hard, drudging work, and I'm no hand at that. Furthermore, my dear Dante, you Christians mightn't take too kindly to some of the things in Lucian and Menander, or even in Plato. You couldn't do with them what your Thomas Aquinas did with Aristotle. They just don't fit."

"It's a pity, nevertheless." Dante sighed. "It must be wonderful to know what Plato *really* said."

When the hour turned late and it was time to go, the Christian and the Jew had become fast friends. For all his light cynicism and mockery

Immanuel was passionately fond of poetry. They met on many common grounds.

But Immanuel, it seemed, had no religion. He was a sceptic. He believed neither in prayers nor in magic spells. The sole God, he averred, was Love. But Love was a rogue and would toss you, as one does with a pitchfork, from one snare to another. If you cried him mercy, he'd merely answer, "So I decree, so you must obey."

"Don't you believe him," Rebecca interposed earnestly. "My brother adores affecting a cynical attitude. Deep underneath it all he's sincerely religious."

"My sweet sister can't believe the worst of me," laughed Immanuel. "Oh, well, no doubt when I'm old and ready for the grave, I'll turn to religion."

Dante shook his head. "There are a good many Christians who do the same. God is patient, all-merciful."

"He *has* to be. How else could He tolerate the human race?"

Dante remained in Rome a week longer—three days more than required. He spent most of his time with Immanuel ben Solomon. When, finally, he received absolution and remission of all his sins, he bid his friend farewell. They promised to send copies of all their poems to each other.

"I don't write much now," warned Dante. "I've become a political man."

"What a pity!" For once Immanuel turned serious. "The mission of the poet is God-given; that of the politician is from the devil."

Then his mask slipped into place. "As for me, I stand on the side, and cheer the winner."

"You remind me of two friends of mine."

"Who are they?"

"Guido Cavalcanti and Cecco Angiolieri. But they would have to merge and become one."

The next morning, at dawn, Dante left for Florence.

He had been on the road barely an hour when it struck him that he hadn't seen Pope Boniface.

CHAPTER XIII

All my woes and all my misfortunes had their origin and commencement with my unlucky election to the priorate.

Dante's Letter

IN the month that Dante had been away from Florence much had happened. For one thing he found himself again a father. His two young sons, Pietro and Jacopo, and his baby, Antonia, had been joined by another daughter.

Dante looked down on the red little face and screwed-up eyes. He hadn't been much of a father to his other children, he admitted candidly. Their squallings and clamours had broken in on his studies and they were always underfoot when he wanted peace. But this little one——

She had been born at a most propitious time. It was a year of Jubilee and exactly thirteen hundred years since the birth of Christ. The stars were in a highly favourable conjunction and their gentle influences would assist her on her natural road to goodness. She had been born while he was on holy pilgrimage. All things were in his latest daughter's favour.

"It's time you were back, Dante," said Gemma, still weak from her confinement. "We've been waiting with the baptism. Her name will be Maria, after my mother."

A strange feeling came over Dante. Hitherto he had been content to let Gemma decide on the baptismal names. It was a matter of indifference to him; and he tried, as much as possible, to avoid domestic quarrels over non-essential things. God knew Gemma's tongue was sharp enough when she was aroused, and it seemed to take but a little to arouse her.

With this new-born babe, however, there was a difference. *She* required a name with pregnant meaning that would fit the circumstances of her nativity. *Maria* was a good name—was it not the name of the blessed Virgin?—but it was, as Gemma had incautiously pointed out, indelibly associated with her family. *This* child was his—and his alone.

A vision took slow shape and form before his eyes. Not, as in the past, in swift and clear delineation. This one came wreathed in cloudy mist, as if it were struggling through thicknesses of base material. First it was in presence like a rainbow, of many milky hues. Then light glowed within the iridescent cloud and pushed outward in clear shafts of glory.

Enthroned among the stars sat a lady, from whom all light emanated. She was robed in hue of living flame, and olive wreathed her shining hair. Dante commenced to shake, as he had in childhood days.

The lady bent her eyes towards him, and there was anger in them as well as pity.

"Look at me well!" she said. "For indeed I am Beatrice, whom you have for long years forgotten. Knew you not, oh, wretched man, that your happiness was here?"

The tears of youth gushed from his eyes and he moaned for forgiveness.

"Forgiveness?" she asked, and the sternness of her countenance refused to alter. "Did I not ever seek to sustain you on the right path with my countenance? Yet when I changed from flesh to spirit did you not desert me?"

"But I have even now received absolution for my sins," he cried. "God has seen fit to forgive; why not you?"

"What of the future, Dante? Your path is set. You journey in a dark and savage wood and you are still astray, though the midpoint of your life is reached."

It seemed then that a new-born babe, in likeness to his own, opened tiny arms towards that distant lady. Its innocent face uplifted like a flower.

The countenance of Beatrice softened and gentled. She smiled, and her smile was like a balm. "For your sake, pure and still unsoiled spirit, I forgive. Let him take heed and follow me hereafter."

The light vanished, and the clouds rolled over her.

"Why do you stare so wildly?" asked Gemma in exasperation. "I speak to you about our child's name, and you refuse an answer."

Dante gathered his trembling forces. "I have already decided on a name," he said. "We shall name her Beatrice."

"Beatrice? Why Beatrice? Oh—oh! Haven't you forgotten that wretched woman? Must you throw her up to me in the form of my own child? I won't stand for it. It's going to be Maria and nothing——"

"She will be baptized Beatrice." Dante's voice was so terrible that Gemma shrank in her bed and began to cry.

It was not only in domestic matters that things had changed during his pilgrimage. Florence was again in fierce upheaval. The feud of the Cerchi and the Donati had come to a climax. The day before his return there had been another encounter in the streets. A partisan of the Cerchi suffered a grievous wound and others on both sides went home bruised and bleeding. Florence was split into two armed and hostile camps. The party of the Donati called themselves the Blacks; those who adhered to the Cerchi took the opposite name of Whites. But the Cerchi, with the aid of those Ghibellines who were still in Florence, were

temporarily in control. Guido Cavalcanti, because of his personal feud with Corso Donati, adhered to the Cerchi. He demanded that Dante take a decided stand. Dante refused. He wished to keep clear of party faction and party warfare.

"There must be those," he said, "who adhere to neither side. If these insane struggles persist, Florence is doomed."

Guido flung away in anger. But Vieri de' Cerchi cautioned his rash partisan against a breach. "Let Alighieri be," he advised. "He's in our camp though he doesn't know it. The schism with Corso is too deep for healing. Alighieri is a proud man—almost as proud as you, Messer Cavalcanti. If you push him too hard he'll be lost to us. Let me handle him."

Accordingly, at a meeting of the Council, Vieri proposed that Messer Dante Alighieri be sent as ambassador to San Gimignano to invite them to join in electing a new Captain for the Guelf League of Tuscany. Dante was pleased with his appointment. It proved that he was considered a man of weight in Florence.

So successful was he in his mission—a delicate one, for San Gimignano was inclined towards the Ghibellines—that on his return he was met as one who had achieved a triumph. "He is a moderate man," everyone said, "and fit for every undertaking. We need men like Alighieri in Florence." Cerchi smiled to himself.

One day, late in May, Dante came home bursting with excitement. He flung his hat upon a chair and embraced his wife. Gemma stared. Ever since the dispute over the child's name he had not embraced her.

"Something has happened?" she asked in wonderment.

"It has, my Gemma." He was gay and flushed, and most unlike himself. "I've been elected a Prior of Florence. I take office on the fifteenth of the month."

"Well, it's about time!" she exclaimed and kissed him of her own accord. She forgot her former nagging and constant railing at what she called his idleness. She, the wife of a Prior! She had a pleasant vision of the stir among her friends. Her thoughts busied with the clothes she must buy to befit her new station. "They should have recognized your worth years ago."

"I don't know how worthy I am, Gemma. And the Priorate is only for two months."

"Oh, they'll re-elect you again," she told him confidently. "Now, shall I get a green dress with gold trimmings, or a gold dress with green trimmings?"

When Dante took office, the convulsions in Florence had reached such a pitch that there were those who sent secretly to Pope Boniface

to invoke his aid. The long-defeated Ghibellines, they pointed out, were rising again and fishing in the troubled waters. Corso Donati, galled at the strength displayed by the hated Cerchi in the government, even suggested that the Pope cause some prince of the house of France to be sent to Florence to abase the Whites and their adherents among the despised *popolani*.

The secret negotiations leaked out. The news spread like a flame of fire through the city. The *popolani* rioted. "Death to the traitor Donati!" they shouted and moved threateningly against their strongholds. "Death to all the Blacks!"

The partisans on the other side rallied and set up countercries. "Death to the Cerchi and the Whites!"

In a twinkling barricades appeared in the streets, and the tall towers were manned with armed adherents.

The Signory of Priors met in grave and troubled session. There were six of them. If Florence were not to fall into grievous civil war, something must be done immediately.

But, as Dante looked around at his fellow Priors, he saw that the divisions in the streets were sharply echoed within the Signory itself. Palmieri degli Altoviti declaimed against the Blacks and called for stern measures of coercion. Whereupon Jacopo degli Alberti declared fiercely that the trouble lay all on the side of the Whites. If they were dealt with in the proper fashion, there would be an end to the matter. One Prior took his side; another, with equal vehemence, held with Palmieri.

Dino Compagni, the fifth Prior, with a house on the Arno and a shop close to the palace in which they met, was troubled. He was a man of peace and saw the ruin of peaceful trade in these proposals. He sought to pour the oil of compromise on both sets of fiery partisans. "Extreme measures," he deprecated, "will lead only to more extreme violence. Let us not move hastily in these dangerous matters. Let us wait and see. Perhaps the fuel will burn itself out as it has done in times past."

But both sides disdained his cautious merchant counsel and shouted the fiercer at each other.

Dante sat alone, watching the growing strife. Had these men arms in their hands, he reflected, they'd be at each other's throats. What will become of Florence when the rulers of the city reflect the passions of the street? If we are not to perish in our madness, we must act with decision and in harmony. But what is there to do?

He let the tumult rage about him while he sat and tried to think of methods. He was no longer a White, though he had leaned towards them, and his dearest friend was in their ranks. He was no longer hostile

to the Blacks, though Corso Donati, who had mortally insulted him, was their chief. He was now a citizen of Florence and heedful only of her good.

He had come a long way. He had once disdained the city politics and sought his good in books. He realized now that one might not escape so easily from his times. One could not, like the Roman of old, retreat to a pleasant country estate to read philosophy and pass the days in writing little verse while the barbarian hordes rolled over the Empire.

He loved Florence. He hadn't known how much he loved her until this day in which she seemed ready to be torn to bits. She was his city; his mother. She had been a Roman town; there must be Romans yet among them, still free from the taint of the alien Fiesolean hordes who had poured down from the hills to weaken their blood. They must be called upon to rise, to act. How?

A plan shaped in his mind. At first he recoiled from his own contriving. It was a hard plan, a harsh plan. But as he thought anew, the conviction grew on him that only by such hardness and harshness could Florence be saved. He rose to speak.

The others halted in their violence. Alighieri was a moderate man. Let us hear what he has to say.

Dante started slowly, groping for words.

"We're not accomplishing anything, Signori. We six are the constituted Priors of the city. In our hands rests the decision for peace or war. Look out of the windows and you may see the crowds. Open them, and you will hear the tumult."

His voice gathered strength.

"Ours is a fair city, Signori. A mighty city, if we act aright. But this Florence, which is our mother, lies groaning in travail. If we heed her not, she will perish. And with her perish ourselves, and all the people who have laboured to make her great.

"But what is this trouble which has come to Florence? Is it the plague? We were never healthier. Is it an external foe who seeks to batter down our walls? Pisa is quiet, Arezzo silent, and all our enemies have good reason to fear the weight of our arms. What then?"

The Priors were silent now, listening.

"It is ourselves who are to blame, Signori. These endless woes have come from within our walls, from men who claim to be citizens of Florence. But they are like unnatural children who attack their parent. To satisfy their feuds and greed for power they strike down the mother who gave them birth."

"You speak the truth," nodded Dino Compagni. "But what can we, the Priors, do?"

"Do?" Dante echoed sarcastically. "Surely not sit here and squabble. We must act, and act in such a fashion that no one dare declare us partisan in our action. The chiefs of the Blacks and the chiefs of the Whites alike have insulted our laws and broken the peace. Very well, then, let us hold them equally guilty, without inclining to either side. Let us take these troublous chiefs—the Donati, the Cerchi, and all who hold with them—and banish them to separate places of exile. Let him who first refuses to go feel the combined weight of our judgment."

He made a significant gesture towards the window. "The people of Florence wish for peace. They will rally to us when we show we are in truth impartial and a government."

The Priors stared at each other. They were aghast. This was action of which they hadn't dreamed.

"You confuse the innocent with the guilty," objected Altoviti at last. "The Whites are not——"

"I confuse no one," interrupted Dante sternly. "Are there not decrees that no magnate may bear arms? Have they not equally flaunted these decrees? It is *you* who confuse with your talk of Blacks and Whites."

He paused a moment. When he resumed, his voice was choked and a little tired. "You forget, Altoviti, my dearest friend is a White. You all know what Guido Cavalcanti is to me. Yet Florence, my city, *your* city, is greater even than friendship, than ties of kin. Not even Guido Cavalcanti must be spared. Not Forese Donati, who is also my friend, on the other side. They must all go into exile. Only then will peace and prosperity return to Florence, and a chance to bind up our wounds."

They stared again in silence, weighing his words. They felt a little ashamed. They knew the friendship that existed between Alighieri and Cavalcanti. They knew the sacrifice it meant for him to come to such a terrible decision.

Dino rose quickly. "I hold with Alighieri," he cried. "My Guild is tired of these frays. They will approve and support us in this step."

Alberti said with an effort. "Very well, then, so be it."

The motion was put and carried. The names of the exiles were drawn; the places of exile set. Steps were decided on to raise the Guilds and all the *popolani* to carry their decree into effect.

When it was over, Dante was very tired. He sat with his head bowed in his hands. He had sent Guido into exile—Guido who was his best friend and sworn comrade. "It isn't easy," he whispered to himself, "to be a man of politics and a patriot."

They left him alone and discreetly departed. He sat a long time, thinking.

His brother, the King, likewise approved. One kinsman of his, Charles of Anjou, had already been given a kingdom by the Pope. But that kingdom, in Sicily, had bloodily revolted against its French overlord. Both Charles of Anjou and the Pope required French help. If Charles of Valois, neccessitous and foot-loose, were given the rule of the rich land of Tuscany, France must wax in power. Which was just what Pope Boniface desired. All his schemes called for the use of France as a barrier to the still-dreaded pretensions of the Empire to temporal possessions in Italy.

It was he who quietly suggested to the Blacks of Florence that they request him to send them Charles of Valois. Corso, desperate as he was, had agreed. All signs pointed to a speedy fruition of his schemes.

But Florence had circumvented him. By banishing both sides, all pretext for papal intervention vanished. Dante had this well in mind when he made his proposal. He wished no foreign prince to rule in Florence. Nor did he wish the Pope to have a say in the affairs of his beloved city. He had heard too much about Boniface to be other than deeply suspicious of the ambitious Pontiff.

Boniface was patient as well as ambitious. He knew how to bide his time. It was not in the nature of the Florentines, he reflected, to remain long at peace. Another opportunity for intervention must inevitably arise.

Meanwhile Dante laboured diligently to make the peace enduring. The prospects seemed fair. The moderates were in control. They soothed and cajoled and were firm when firmness was necessary. Florence quieted, and goods flowed into the city and flowed out again to all Europe.

But the summer was hot, and Dante worried about his friend. Serrezzano was notoriously unhealthy in the summer months. The strange behaviour of Guido likewise haunted him. It was so unlike that reckless, fearless man. As the summer moved into late July, his worry grew. There was talk of malaria among the exiles of Serrezzano.

At the next meeting of the Priors he called attention to the talk. "We don't wish them to die," he pointed out. "It was merely a temporary expedient—this exile—to give hot passions a chance to cool. I think the end has been achieved. Let the men at Serrezzano return."

Alberti, who favoured the Blacks, inquired: "How about the men at Pieve? If one returns, so should the other. Didn't you say you were impartial?"

"I am, Alberti. But there is no sickness at Pieve, and you've read the reports. Corso Donati is still in close communication with Pope Boniface. Do you wish to bring the French to Florence?"

Slowly, dispiritedly, they came to the right bank of the Arno, back into Florence. As they neared, he saw how sallow they were, and yellow. They were ill. The malarial air was upon them.

Fear seized Dante. He forgot his pride and strode quickly to the horsemen.

"You are welcome, Messers," he greeted. "But where is Guido Cavalcanti?"

They looked at him with sunken eyes. In their depths he saw a flicker of bitterness. Baldinaccio moved his hand backwards as though it were a heavy weight.

"There he is, Alighieri," he spoke with hoarse effort. "Behold your handiwork."

A cart was lumbering over the bridge. It was drawn by oxen. With a cry Dante ran to it.

On a pallet of straw lay Guido. His face was sallow and he was shivering so that the heavy coverings upon him shook and leaped, though the day was hot. His eyes were closed.

"Guido, my friend!" cried Dante in terrible fear. "Open your eyes. Speak to me! Tell me——"

The sick man forced his lids apart. He gazed upwards at his anguished friend. He moved his lips. Only a whisper came through. Dante ran with the cart to listen.

"Greetings, Dante. I—told you—I wouldn't return."

"But you were wrong, Guido. Don't you see you were wrong? You *are* here."

Guido moved his head in denial. "No, Dante, I am not here. I——" He closed his eyes again.

They took the sick man to the palace of the Cavalcanti. They put him to bed and called in doctors. He went into delirium.

By the end of the week Guido Cavalcanti was dead.

He thought of his own life. He had passed the middle arch. He remembered his last vision of Beatrice and her warning. He sighed. He had failed to take heed of that warning. He still wandered in the gloomy wood, astray, and the Mount of Salvation was as far from his eye as ever. His worldly pride and self-sufficiency were still upon him, and Beatrice was hardly ever at his side—or God. Would he change as he walked down the final path? He didn't know.

He liked to go and watch the progress of the Church of Santa Maria Novella. He thought highly of the Franciscans whose church it was. He sat on a flat stone and observed the busy workmen for hours. He chatted with the architect, Arnolfo di Cambio. Arnolfo was full of plans for Florence. His eyes kindled when he discussed them. He wanted, he said, to make it the finest city in the world. He showed sketches of the great Duomo, already commenced in the north portion of the town.

But most he liked to visit Giotto at his painting. The young artist worked slowly, painting and repainting his fresco, not satisfied until every detail was perfect. With passionate interest Dante watched his own form grow upon the wall.

It was a curious picture. Before his eyes there grew, stroke by stroke, the portrait of a young man. He was tender and yet virile, softly handsome and yet not effeminate. He was serene, yet grave. His nose was still delicately aquiline, though now it jutted in more angular sweep. The lines of manhood had not yet hardened on the smooth countenance. A long gown broke off at his bust. On his head sat a white cap, turned back to show the dark red lining. Under one arm he held his book, *La Vita Nuova*. The fingers of the other hand grasped three pomegranates, outlined against a yellow drapery.

"But that isn't I," cried Dante in amazement. "Look at me!"

Giotto made another brush stroke, stepped back to survey the effect. "You don't know yourself, Messer Alighieri." He grinned a little. "I'm painting you as you were some years ago. I required a youthful figure for this particular spot. I wished to symbolize the grace of youth, learning that rested lightly, and the gladness of the earth." His grin broadened. His peasant face was merry. "Since *you* don't stick to the literal truth in your poems, why do you expect the artist to be any different?"

Dante resumed attendance at the sessions of the Council. He was given charge of the repair and widening of the street of San Procolo: "So that the common people may, without uproar and harassing of magnates and mighty men, have access whenever it be desirable to the Lord Priors and the Standard-Bearer of Justice" the decree recited. There was indeed peace, but the Council felt doubtful of the future and

Once more Dante stood on the height of Montemalo and saw outspread beneath him the massive, ruined walls and the dense forest of domes, towers, and battlements that was Rome.

But this time he came in different fashion. He was an official ambassador of Florence, and not a private pilgrim. The Year of Jubilee had gone to its decay, and with it all the hopes that men had had for peace and justice. The year, 1301, was like any other year. There were wars, assassinations, feuds, lusts, greed, corruption, as always. He had learned more about Pope Boniface, whom he was soon to meet, than he had known before. He knew now that he was not only avid for honours for his family, but that he shamelessly sold the holy offices of the Church for gold. He knew now that the Pope would not be content until all Italy bowed the temporal, as well as spiritual knee to him.

Dante reined his horse a moment on the height. There, below, battle waited. His head went up unconsciously and his face hardened. It was a different kind of Campaldino. He nodded to his companions.

"Come," he said. "Let us descend."

The Pope kept them waiting two weeks in Rome. He was in no hurry to receive these ambassadors from Florence. He knew exactly what their mission was, and he had no intention of yielding to their protests. But neither did he wish to give an outright refusal; for Florence was a proud city and would retort with a frenzy of defence. It was better to temporize and hold the ambassadors as long as possible, while Charles of Valois moved according to plan.

Each day the ambassadors petitioned for an audience, and each day the Pontiff returned evasive answer.

Finally Dante could stand it no longer. He resolved to force the issue.

"We'll send Boniface a note," he told the others. "It will read as follows: 'Either Your Holiness grants us an audience on our urgent business by tomorrow, or we return to Florence and inform the Signori of the failure of our mission.'"

"But that will offend His Holiness," declared Maso in a shocked voice.

"Then he'll be offended," said Dante grimly. "I have no mind to breathe the air of Rome a day longer than is necessary. Are you agreed, or not?"

Since they were confused men and clung to Dante as a leader, they agreed.

The next day a Papal messenger brought an answer. "I have at length freed myself from my troublesome business. I shall await the ambassadors of Florence in my private apartment at noon."

interest. He disregarded the other two as negligible ciphers. Here was the man with whom he would have to deal. His Florentine informants had told him in advance about this Dante Alighieri. Single-handed he had driven two powerful factions out of Florence. Single-handed he had subdued the haughty Donati himself. He would bear observing.

He saw before him a man of thirty-six, slighter in frame and of medium height. He stooped a little, as one who bent much over his studies. He was dark of complexion and jet-black of eye. Those eyes, as they stared boldly back at him, were piercing in their brilliance; more piercing and more brilliant than his own. They gave him an uncomfortable feeling; as though they had penetrated his outward port and were searching out the secret springs of thought. Already, though he was only thirty-six, his face was lined with care and serious reflection. It had witnessed more of tragedy than of joy. The nose was sharp and bold, and the chin strongly pointed. It was the face of a proud man, even arrogant. It bent in humility to no one, not even to the Pope.

Decidedly, Dante Alighieri would bear watching.

Boniface resumed his seat. He did not relax his gaze.

"We have our credentials," said Dante. "Do you wish to examine them, Your Holiness?"

Boniface waved them aside. "You may leave them with the secretary. But what is this urgent business of which you spoke?" His long fingers tapped the desk. "Your note was exceedingly abrupt."

"We've been awaiting Your Holiness's pleasure for more than two weeks," said Dante respectfully but firmly. "Our mission is urgent. Reports have reached the Signory of Florence that Charles of Valois has come to Italy with French horse."

"So he has. What does it concern the Signory? He comes to aid my forces against Sicily."

"The Signory has other information. It is stated, and Messer Corso Donati proclaims it, that Charles intends to enter Florence."

Boniface lost his composure. "Corso Donati is a fool!" he exploded. But immediately he regained his calm. He put on a benevolent air. "Suppose he does? It will be solely as my peace-maker. For a long time I've viewed the dreadful strife in Florence with a bleeding heart. It grieves me sorely that this brightest jewel of Tuscany should so be filled with hate and rancour. Are not both parties Catholic and subject to the will of God and His Vicar on earth? Why do they seek to slay each other? If it should be my doing to bring about a reconciliation, I shall consider it one of the happiest days that God, in His grace, has given me."

Dante was not deceived. "There is already peace in Florence, Your Holiness. There has been peace for over a year."

"Why are you so obstinate, you Florentines?" he changed abruptly. "Humble yourself before me and it will be well. I tell you truly I have no other intention than to bring about your peace. Open your hearts to receive the light and you will be exalted. Two of you return home and say this to your Signori. If you secure obedience to my will, you shall have my blessing."

Open our gates to the Valois, rather, thought Dante. Not while I have a voice and an exhortation. "Very well, Your Holiness," he said aloud. "Messer Minerbetti and I shall report your words to the Signori. We'll leave at once."

"Nay, Messer Alighieri," smiled Boniface. The lion became fox. "Let Minerbetti and Corazzo go. *You* remain with me. I wish to discuss these matters with you more at our leisure."

It was a command, veiled in soft language and a smile. Dante knew it as such.

When they returned to their quarters, Corazzo said eagerly: "Maso and I will leave for Florence in the morning." He would breathe easier when he was quit of Rome. He had quaked in the presence of the Pope. Alighieri's language had been too bold. One had heard much of what Boniface did when aroused to wrath.

"No," corrected Dante. "We *all* leave together."

"But the Pope said——"

"Never mind what he said. I am the ambassador of a free city and independent of his will. This matter requires careful discussion in the Council. I intend to be present."

He stared absently from the window. It was open and he had a wide view of the street below. It was late afternoon and the usual motley crowds surged up and down its narrow width.

Suddenly his eyes fixed. They stared intently at something beneath; then moved rapidly to either end of the street. He turned from the window and his face was rigid.

"You are right, Corazzo," he said slowly. "You two will go. I shall remain."

"What made you change your mind so quickly?"

Dante grimaced. "The reason is below. Look out."

The ambassadors rushed to the window. Five armed men, the points of their halberds ominous in the sun, lounged in front of the inn. An officer, sword at his side, stared with open boredom at the crowd. Spaced at regular intervals along the street were other armed men.

"The Pope," said Dante calmly, "is obviously taken with me. He wishes to insure himself of my continued presence."

"Holy Virgin!" whispered Maso.

"Explain to the Council and the Signori," continued Dante rapidly, "what you have seen and heard. Exhort them, with the utmost earnestness of which you are capable, under no circumstances to admit Charles of Valois within their walls. It will be easy to let him in; but most difficult to get him out. Now hurry!"

Dante was a prisoner in Rome. Not an open or an avowed one. There was no interference with his movements within the city walls. Yet wherever he went, men followed him, pausing when he paused, and waiting patiently without the houses he entered until he had emerged. Once Dante tested the surveillance. He walked casually to the city gate, as if to breathe the country air outside. He had no gear with him, nor his horse. It was his intention, if he were able to get out, to hide until the night, hire a horse in some nearby hamlet, and ride direct for Florence.

But an officer of the Papal Guard appeared suddenly and said with deep respect: "It is inadvisable, Messer Alighieri, to walk the country. We have word of bandits in the neighbourhood."

"I am well able to take care of myself."

The officer shook his head. "I am commissioned by His Holiness for your protection. He would never forgive me if anything happened to an ambassador. Do not go further, I beg you."

Dante yielded to necessity and turned back. He burned with inner rage; but there was nothing he could do. In Rome he was helpless against the Pope. His thoughts flew to Florence with quickened anxiety. What was happening there? He knew that Maso and Corazzo were too dull and timorous to rouse Florence adequately to its peril. If only *he* were there!

He sought another audience with the Pope. But Boniface did not wish to see him. It was enough that he held this vigorous antagonist in Rome while his plans matured in Florence. He returned vague words about his press of business. Some day, soon, in the near future, he would be pleased to see Messer Alighieri. But that day didn't come.

Dante gnawed at himself. He had been a fool to walk straight into the lion's den. He would have been infinitely more valuable at home in this crisis than here, futilely a prisoner. He cursed that pride and vanity of his which had insisted he might be able to sway Boniface from his course. Boniface was not one to be swayed by words.

He frequented the haunts of the Florentines, seeking news. He stopped at inns and inquired of newly-arrived travellers. No one could tell him anything. And no letters came from the Council, or from the departed ambassadors. He wrote letters, stating his position, exhorting them what they should do. There were no answers.

He took to wandering about Rome again. But he was not this time the carefree pilgrim; he was a guarded prisoner. Wherever he went, men of the Pope were not far behind. The ancient sites of Rome lost their savour.

Then he remembered the Jew, Immanuel.

Immanuel met him with outstretched hands. "I heard you were in Rome, my Dante. But since you didn't come or send a note, I didn't think it fitting to intrude. A Jew, you know——"

"You wrong me, Immanuel." He explained how things stood.

Immanuel listened attentively. He shook his head. "Politics," he declared, "is a dangerous game. You are a poet. You betray your genius when you mix with things that shouldn't concern you."

"But they *do* concern me. Am I not a Florentine?"

"A Florentine? No, my Dante, you're a citizen of the world. Take a lesson from us Jews. We have no city or nation. Wherever we settle—Rome, Toledo, Bagdad, Alexandria—we remain ourselves. We cultivate what we have to cultivate, and remain free even in the midst of persecution. We own our spirits and our minds. What does it matter whether petty Florence is governed by Pope or Signori or Emperor? Will your burgher love his money-bags or your noble his mistress any the less?"

"A strange doctrine, my friend, coming from one whose ancestors defended Jerusalem to the last man; even to the last child."

Immanuel's eyes burned. "What did it gain them?" he asked vehemently. "Their own deaths, the destruction of their city, and the doom upon their children's children to wander the earth, eternally homeless, eternally cringing before the brutal whims of a thousand overlords, eternally despised. It would have been far better had they yielded to Rome their taxes and thrown a pinch of incense to their silly Caesars."

Then, as though he regretted this vision of his naked, desperate soul to the Catholic, he resumed his outward mocking. "But enough of that. I'm no preacher, thank God! I live for the moment and enjoy myself. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"If you will. I've written many letters to Florence, but I fear my messengers are stopped beyond the gates, and the letters taken from them."

Immanuel smiled. "Say no more, Dante. Let me have your next and I promise you it will reach its destination. We Jews have learned through many centuries how to handle these matters."

"Thank you. I'll have several ready for you in the morning. How is Rebecca?"

"Still beautiful—and unwed."

"A pity, but it will pass. Surely her own charms and the dowry——"
Immanuel laughed harshly. "She'll have to depend on her charms, my friend. There'll be no dowry."

"I don't understand. I considered you——"

"Wealthy? I was. No more. I'm a spendthrift, Dante. I raced through my worthy father's hard-won gold—blessed be his name! I added nothing of my own except memories of good living and some worthless poems. You see before you a ruined man, with creditors lurking at every corner."

"I'm sorry to hear it. Can I help?"

Immanuel smiled affectionately. "You'd be amazed if you heard the sum total. No, my dear friend, I involve no one in my troubles. Since they're of my own making, I'll handle them myself. I may have to travel," he added slyly.

"Come to Florence."

"I'll see."

Dante wrote his letters and handed them to Immanuel. He was confident they'd reach Florence.

But three days later news came that proved it was too late. Dante encountered a man just arrived from Siena, and questioned him as was his wont.

"Charles of Valois, and all his retinue, are in Florence, Messer Alighieri," declared the man. "He entered on All Saints' Day."

Dante turned cold. "Are you certain?" he asked hoarsely.

"As certain as I am that I have eyes. I passed through Florence on my way to Rome."

"But it's incredible! After what the ambassadors reported——"

"I don't know anything about that. All I know is what I've seen and heard. The city debated a while; but the Frenchman assured them he only wished to make peace among them. If they still feared, he said, his men would enter without arms. I was there myself when he came. The city met him with a procession and many jousts with banners."

"Gracious Virgin!" groaned Dante, "protect these fools from their folly! Is he still there?"

The Sieneſe looked at him askance. "I should say so. They gave him the lordship of the city and authority to make peace among the Gueſſs."

Dante ſtruck his head. "Worſe and worſe!"

"You may well ſay ſo," ſaid the traveller. He was beginning to enjoy his news. "Because, as ſoon as he received the lordſhip, the Frenchman armed his men in violation of his word. The magiſtrates, thinking themſelves betrayed, barricaded themſelves in their houſes."

The people ran to get bludgeons and pikes. But Corso Donati left his exile and with a band of followers broke into the city. His friends within raised a great cry: 'Long live Messer Corso!' The people, befuddled, didn't know what to do."

"Where was Messer Vieri de' Cerchi all this while?" demanded Dante heatedly.

The traveller grinned. "I didn't see him. But it was said the Cerchi was quaking in his own palace."

Dante groaned again. "My fault! My fault! If Guido were alive——"

"What do you say?"

"No matter. What else?"

"Well, Donati threatened the Priors so that they resigned immediately and fled from their homes. Then the returned Blacks began to pillage and slay and burn. They ran through the city as though they had conquered it by force of arms. And Donati set up a new government of his own kind."

That meant the Cavalcanti palace was doubtless gutted, thought Dante in despair. His own home? No; Gemma was there. Corso wouldn't harm her, even to get at *him*. "Lucky for me I married a Donati!" he thought with bitter irony.

"Where was Charles of Valois while this was happening?"

His informant shrugged. "I don't know. No doubt holding his peace until his friend, the Donati, was finished. When the pillaging started, I decided it was time for me to go. In their enthusiasm, the Blacks might have mistaken me for a Florentine White. Especially since I had a store of valuable goods with me."

Dante sat up all that night, thinking. Everything was lost through the wretched weakness of the Whites. Where had their wits been, their boasted valour? How Vieri had carried it with a high hand, until it came to arms! Then he cowered in his house. The leader of the fore-fighters at Campaldino had turned into a coward.

What was he to do now? There was no sense in returning to Florence to submit himself to the mercies of Corso Donati. But he was also a prisoner in Rome!

The next morning he looked out. No guards were stationed before the inn. He went out. No one followed him. He walked boldly and without concealment to the gate. No one prevented his exit. He returned to the inn and managed a smile. Now that his movements mattered so little, he was free to do as he pleased. The Pope had received the news as well as he.

Since there was nowhere else to go, he remained in Rome, waiting for the turn of events. They weren't long in coming.

At the beginning of the new year a letter came by messenger for

Dante. It was the first he had received from Florence since the day he had left on his ill-omened mission. He stared at the official seal upon it. Slowly he opened the letter.

It was a summons from the new Podestà, bidding him peremptorily to return to Florence and answer charges of corruption and extortion while he had been in office. There were other charges—long and manifold. He was accused of conspiring against the Pope, against his representative, Charles of Valois, and against the peace of Florence and the dignity of the Guelph Party.

The next day came another letter. This was private, and from Forese Donati. "By no means return to Florence" [it urged]. "My brother has sworn to slay you if he gets you in his power. For the love we once bore each other, I risk this warning. Do not return! Have no fears about Gemma and the children. They are safe, since they are Donati."

Donati? His wife, yes. But not his children! Let the name of Donati be accursed for ever! But there was Forese, who had risked much if his hot-headed brother discovered his warning.

What was he to do? In one swift overturn all his dreams for Florence, all his own fortunes, had collapsed. Extortion! Corruption! The usual accusations of those who wish to destroy their man. Let them try and prove these charges. To the others he would answer boldly and frankly. Since when was it treason to wish to hold your country free from foreign domination? He was sorely tempted to disregard Forese's warning and return. *He* was no coward.

But Immanuel sided strongly with Forese. "You're a fool, if you'll permit the term. Of course they'll prove their charges. They'll have a hundred witnesses to swear you demanded bribes. Not only will the fickle people who formerly shouted you up believe them, but they'll tear you to pieces and save Donati the job. You stay right here and we'll sing songs to each other."

"A fine occupation!"

"Better than having no throat with which to sing," Immanuel said reasonably.

At the end of January another official letter came. Since the said Dante Alighieri had failed to appear, it read, he was forthwith condemned as charged and fined five thousand florins; and the sums he had illegally exacted, amount not stated, were to be restored; all within three days from date. On failure so to do, all his goods were forfeit. In addition, he was banished from Tuscany for a space of two years, and for ever barred from holding office in Florence.

Dante looked at the date. It was January 27, 1302. The day on which he received the latter was January 31st.

"I am a ruined man," Dante told Immanuel.

"Then we're ruined together. But at least," grinned Immanuel, "I had a gay time getting ruined. How about *you*?"

Even if Dante had desired to pay the fine and restore wholly mythical sums it was already beyond the date. It was not the intention of his enemies to let him off with mere money fines. Therefore, when the day was past, they took the final step.

They pronounced sentence of death upon Dante and ten other Whites who had fled from Florence.

"If any of the aforesaid," read the sentence, "at any time should come into the hands of the said Commonwealth, such an one shall be burned with fire so that he die."

Beyond such sentence there was no going!

CHAPTER XV

*Thou shalt leave each thing
Beloved most dearly: this is the first shaft
Shot from the bow of exile. Thou shalt prove
How salt the savour is of others' bread;
How hard the passage to descend and climb
By others' stairs.*

Paradiso

FOR some days Dante lived in a sort of stupor. So terrible had been the blow, so violent and sudden its ferocity, that he reacted at first with a dazed incomprehension.

Florence, beloved Florence, where he had been born and raised to manhood! Florence, where he had hoped to end the days allotted to him! Florence, fairest daughter of Rome, to have cast him out among strangers and condemned him to the fire if he return! It was incredible!

Dante had the sensation of a ship suddenly set upon by malignant winds, stripped of its sails and rudder in a trice and driven, parched and aimless, to alien shores and harbours. At night he tossed in anguish, dreaming of his native city, revisiting each blessed spot made dear to him by long association, and moaning in his dream as each place slipped away in endless banishment.

Immanuel came to him daily. His cynicism was gone, he showed solicitude and sympathetic understanding.

"Why have they done this to me?" queried Dante in bewilderment. "What have I done to deserve it? I sought the good of Florence; I sought nothing for myself. I cannot live without her."

Immanuel looked with pity on the wretched man. "We Jews have been in exile for a thousand years and more," he said. "Yet we live. What, isn't the whole world wide enough for you? Are there no other cities and nations besides Florence?"

Dante shook his head. "You don't understand, my friend. My roots are there, my heart and soul. Within her walls I was a man, a citizen. Outside, what am I? A homeless wanderer, seeking shelter; a plant uprooted, doomed to wither for lack of soil and water."

"Be a man, Dante, and rid yourself of this despair. Have you any money?"

"Only the gold in my purse. There is little left. All my lands and possessions are confiscated."

"Your house, too?"

"Perhaps not. Gemma will claim it as her dower. Forese said she wouldn't be molested."

"Good! Let her sell it secretly, or raise money, and join you with your children."

For the first time since his condemnation Dante was compelled to thought. Strange that he hadn't considered Gemma all this while. What were their relations? What must they be in this dark and dolorous future?

He had married Gemma because she had compassionated with him on the death of Beatrice. But soon after marriage her sympathy had fled. Worse, her compassion had changed to jealousy and resentment. She had nagged and she had railed. She had displayed no understanding of his work or of his dreams. In Florence he had been bound by custom and by usage. But now the chains were shattered. Was he then to resume them? But his children. Something bled within his bosom. They were infants yet. They couldn't share his exile and the crusts on which he'd have to live. They were better off in Florence. At least Lapa would be there to look after them. She loved them as her own grandchildren. And his half-brother, Francesco, was a grown man and competent. He'd see to it that they didn't want. He'd write to them at once and explain the situation. But not to Gemma. No, not to Gemma.

"No," he said finally. "Let them stay in Florence."

Immanuel looked at him keenly, and held his peace. He hesitated a moment. "A while ago, Dante, you offered me money. Let me help you now."

"I thought you were ruined."

Immanuel smiled. "So I am. When a man is ruined, a few florins more or less don't matter. I'll borrow and add to the list of my creditors."

"Thank you, my friend. But I'll manage."

"What will you do, then?"

Dante relapsed into apathy. "I don't know," he muttered.

A few days later Immanuel came to him. Dante had never seen him worried before; now the lines were deep upon his forehead.

"You'd better leave Rome at once," he said.

"Why?"

"I've received word—no matter how—that Boniface is considering returning you under arrest to Florence. He calls you a Ghibelline and a conspirator against himself."

Dante started in anger. "I a Ghibelline?" he exclaimed. "He is mad! Didn't I fight the Ghibellines at Campaldino?"

"Not mad, Dante. Politic, let us say. Anyone who's crossed him in

the slightest must, by very nature, be a Ghibelline. The name's a stick with which to beat down opposition."

"Then," said Dante slowly, "I shall in truth become a Ghibelline. Since Boniface, in his greed for power, has forgotten the mission given him by Peter and drawn divisions among Christ's own folk, then let me take the substance as well as the name. Perhaps the Ghibellines are right. An Emperor is needed here on earth. A monarch who will rule with a just and even hand, and force the papacy back into its proper sphere."

"These Christians are dreamers," thought Immanuel. "They're forever hoping for the unattainable. Their Messiah came—and the world wagged on in the same old way. Yet they still expect that some day there'll be justice, peace, and goodwill. Vain illusion! As long as men have passions, desires, ambitions—and that will be until the last earthly day—there'll be no change. But don't our Jews have the same hopes? 'When *our* Messiah comes!' they chant, and wait from year to year."

Nevertheless he beamed. His friend was roused from his torpor. "You will fight back, then?" he inquired.

Dante rose. The dullness was gone from his face. "To the death, Immanuel!"

"Good! I love to see a fighter; though I'm no fighter myself. Let me give you some news, then. Your exiled Whites from Florence are gathering at the castle of the Ubertini in Gargonza to decide on their course."

Dante's eyes flashed. "I'll start for Gargonza tomorrow."

"You'll start tonight, my friend. Boniface moves fast when he wishes."

Dante pushed his horse relentlessly through the warm Italian spring. The countryside breathed bright and clear; the flowers made a gay and variegated carpet; from every leafy branch the birds sang. But he had no eyes for the fair face of nature—he whose appreciative glance used to fix in mind each small detail. He rode straight for his destination. Hope surged in him again. What, hadn't there been exilings and sentences before in Florence? Had not the defeated in turn become the conquerors? The Whites had been driven from their native town. Very well, then; they'd regroup their forces, seek allies, and return. Let the arrogant Donati and their more arrogant protector in Rome not rejoice too soon!

When he reached the borders of Tuscany, he travelled only at night and warily. He was within the reach of the Florentines. If he should now be captured——! He had seen men die in the flames and he had

no mind to be one with them. He loosened his sword so that it could readily be drawn, and rode on.

About twenty miles from his destination Dante heard that the Whites had shifted their base to Arezzo, where their fellow Whites were in control and the Ghibellines were strong. He went to Arezzo.

He was received with acclamation. There had been a rumour that Boniface had seized him and turned him over to Florence. He heard further news of the Black doings in his native city. Not all of the Whites had fled in time. Some of the house of Cavalcanti and some of the Abati had been captured and tortured before they were finally beheaded.

They were an embittered crew—these exiled Whites. They seethed about their place of refuge in Arezzo, shouting, disputing, in a constant turmoil. They had no plans, no line of action. Only in one thing were they united—in a fierce and ineradicable hatred for the town that had cast them out.

"We'll level Florence to the ground," they declared, "and sow the ground with salt, as did the Romans with Carthage. We'll leave no trace of the accursed city forevermore. We'll make it into desolation and a place for crows."

Dante was astounded. "Have you forgotten," he demanded passionately, "that the Ghibellines had once wished to do the same, after we had driven them out? Do you remember the words of Farinata degli Uberti, their leader, who retorted to the proposal of his followers, 'If there be no other than I, while there is life in my body, I'll defend the city with my single sword?' Shall we prove worse than our ancient enemy?"

They stared at him and said to each other, "Alighieri's turned soft and a weakling."

"Besides," he added, "what good is it to talk big while you do nothing? What are your plans to regain Florence?"

They were obliged to confess that they had none.

"Then we must make them," Dante declared. "We must make proposals to the Ghibellines to join us. The time is ripe. Boniface has his hands full now, and can't come to the aid of Florence. You've all heard the news: how he's quarrelled again with the French king over the issue of the tax on clerics. Charles of Valois has left Florence and gone into Sicily where he isn't doing well. The Blacks stand alone. If we gather all the discontented, within and without, we stand a decent assurance of victory. But," he added sternly, "shouting here about our vengeance and quarrelling among ourselves in the meanwhile won't bring success."

There was such good sense in this that the refugees forgot for the moment their restless bickerings and got to work. Emissaries sped to the Ubaldini, ancient enemies of Florence. Others went to Bologna, to Pisa and Pistoia, where Florence was hated. Still others wormed their way into the proscribed city and established contact with their friends within. All were called upon, Ghibelline and White Guelf alike, to join the attack.

A meeting was held in the church of San Godenzo. The ancient edifice was crowded with men from almost every town in Tuscany; and the mountain slopes outside swarmed with the excess. Old Ghibellines of Florence, whom these very Whites had helped send into exile more than thirty-five years before, gazed upon their former foes. Their faces were lean and torn with old suffering, and the memory of Florence scourged them like whips. There were younger Ghibellines, too, born in exile, to whom the city of their parents was but a name. The Uberti, long outlawed and resident in Pisa, came. The recent refugees, the Whites, stared back at these old enemies, and wondered. Bologna sent representatives; so did the men of Romagna and Siena. But chiefly the Ubaldini came, powerful and bold.

The old church rang with the sound of arms and the hoarse confusion of men. Hands went to swords at the sudden sight of those who had once been hated foes; and fell away sheepishly. They were comrades now; united in a common desperation against Florence.

Dante gazed upon the tumult and was sorely puzzled. Would it be possible to weld these myriad conflicts into a single purpose? Would they, if victorious, remember to be wise and moderate? He had no desire to see Florence despoiled and desolate. All he wished was to drive the Donati out, cancel the decrees and return, once more free and erect, to his native soil.

Donato Alberti, by acclaim, was chosen chief. There were a few voices for Dante, but the greater part considered him too moderate for their purpose.

Ubaldini raised immediate objection. "My villages and estates," he told them, "lie open to the Florentine cavalry. If I join you I must be assured of indemnity against loss."

They promised him security. A deed was drawn, and the leaders of the Whites signed the document. Dante was among them. "If we lose," he thought, "I've lost everything, anyway. If we win, I'll manage to make good."

The Bolognese held back. "Florence is a strong town," they said, with memories of earlier wars in mind.

"We won't attack Florence immediately," answered Alberti. "We'll lay siege to Mugello, that holds with them, and lay waste the country.

Then when we've cut Florence off from outside help, we can make the final assault."

"But the Florentines will fall upon us while we lie at siege," argued the Bolognese.

"No, they won't," retorted Alberti. "Our friends in town are so strong and numerous, the Blacks won't dare leave for fear the gates will be closed behind them."

Dante listened with growing amazement. These were plans of which he knew nothing. Alberti and the others were working behind his back. He spoke in a passion.

"If our friends inside are as strong and numerous as you say, why waste time and energy assaulting Mugello? The key is Florence; not Mugello. I don't hold with laying waste the countryside. It is *our* country you would destroy. Let us appear before the walls as deliverers, not as enemies. If we make a great show of strength, the Blacks will be disheartened. Then, as we attack, let these same friends secretly open the gates so we can enter. The Blacks will flee before us. In this way we'll avoid the slaughter and destruction that must arouse even the indifferent or the friendly to take arms against us."

Alberti said with sarcasm: "Your delicacy would do you credit, Messer Alighieri, if we didn't remember how you sent our own White comrades into the miasmas of Serrezzano."

One of the Uberti shouted: "This Alighieri is displeased because he wasn't chosen head. For a petty noble he carries himself haughtily enough. Remember when they chose him for Rome, he wished to know: 'If I go, who remains? If I remain, who goes?'"

Dante flushed a dark red. Already he had regretted that speech made in a moment of impatient anger. Must they cast it up to him for ever? He stared around the heated faces. They were laughing at him, mocking, jeering. Even those who were under similar penalty of death with him. Not a single friendly countenance showed anywhere. "Why, they're my enemies," he thought, surprised. "As much as the Donati. They vent their hatred on me now; tomorrow they'll turn and rend each other."

In a great voice he cried: "I made a mistake to come among you. You're an ingrate and insensate crew, worthy of whatever punishment's been visited on you. You're like a band of thieves who fall out before the booty has been won. You wish no peace for Florence; only personal revenge. You'd wreak it on the innocent and guilty alike. God keep Florence from your clutches. I renounce your scheming councils and your wicked plans. They'll come to naught, I promise you. I renounce you all, Messers. From now on I stand a party all alone."

He stalked through the multitude and hastened back to Arezzo.

Behind him the stunned silence gave way to a storm of anger. Men arose and would have followed to cut him down. But Alberti said with laughter: "Let Alighieri go. He was a hindrance to our plans. Let him make a party of himself as he threatens. It will be a fine party, this great assemblage of one. A good riddance, I say."

Dante arrived at his quarters. He began to pack. He'd not be safe in Arezzo after his outburst. He wasn't sorry for his speech. From the beginning he had been disappointed. They were a worthless lot and nothing noble or strong was to be expected from them. What was there in exile that turned men's souls to gall and their eyes to blindness? Would he, too, some day, fall into the same disaster? He hoped not. No, the deliverance of Florence and his return would not come from them. Where, then? He scanned in his mind the state of Italy and saw only wretched jealousies and purblind quarrels. Not merely Florence, but Italy itself was doomed unless some strong, just power intervened. That power could come only from beyond the Alps. The Papacy had failed. There remained the Empire. But the Empire now was impotent and immersed in local German feuds. He sighed. The future lay dark and loathsome. But in the meantime he must go.

He went to Forlì, where some Whites had fled. But he held aloof. He walked the countryside and waited the outcome of events.

They came in swift succession.

Adhering to their plans the allies besieged Mugello. But the Blacks marched out of Florence and fell upon the besiegers. The Bolognese, who had been assured the Blacks would never dare leave Florence, felt themselves betrayed and fled without a struggle. The dismayed Whites gave battle and were decisively defeated. Donato Alberti and others were captured.

Mounted on asses they were led into a jeering Florence. There they were hung with ropes around their necks so that the tips of their toes barely touched the floor. When they had twitched in agony for a day, they were lowered and beheaded. Those who had fled to Bologna at the first were yielded by that penitent town on the approach of the Florentines. The power of the Whites was scattered and crushed.

When Dante heard the news, he wasn't jubilant. Though he had broken with the Whites, he was aghast. The Donati had showed themselves as cruel and merciless as ever. Now, in truth, there was small chance of return. Even his position in Forlì had grown perilous. If demand was made on the town for his surrender, would they refuse, when the Bolognese had failed? It was time to move again. But where?

He decided on Verona.

The lord of Verona, Bartolommeo della Scala, was a patron of

letters. In the golden days when Dante was in Florence, unsuspecting of future exile, and while the fame of his book was high in Italy, Bartolommeo had invited the poet to his court. Now, a decade later, the time had come to accept the invitation.

Would the invitation still hold? Dante wondered. He had written but little in the intervening years. He had been a politician and man of affairs, to his destruction. Would he, a homeless exile, pursued by the vengeance of the town that wished to burn him, be welcome? He would soon find out.

He packed his scanty belongings and set out again. He was getting used to travelling.

Bartolommeo, to Dante's surprise, remembered his ancient invitation. To his greater surprise he repeated it now.

"You are welcome to Verona, Messer Alighieri," he said agreeably. "You may stay at our court as long as you like. Here you will find we respect genius." He smiled. "In that we don't follow your Florence. You've had a bad time of it, eh?"

Dante was on the verge of tears. He who had been buffeted about by the malignancies of fortune was being offered a refuge, and that in the kindest tone.

"Yes, Your Grace," he said humbly. "I have suffered much. My deepest thanks for your gracious offer. Verona is famous through all Italy for its beneficent patronage of the arts and sciences."

The Lord of Verona was pleased. His eyes lit up. "Is it really?" he asked. "Yes," he added complacently, "the Scaligers are no barbarians. We appreciate poetry and painting. Seek out our chamberlain, Messer Alighieri. He will give you a room and see to it that you don't want."

It was a dismissal, and Dante knew it as such. As he bowed and turned to go, Bartolommeo asked carelessly, "By the way, are you engaged on any special work now?"

Dante hesitated. He wasn't. He had been too torn and involved of late to think much of creative work. "Well——" he began doubtfully.

"Some of our poets," Bartolommeo pursued with an elaboration of unconcern, "have decided on a little competition. They are engaged on a series of odes addressed to our poor person. Our chamberlain was foolish enough, when he heard of it, to offer some sort of prize for the best ode. Of course it's ridiculous, Messer Alighieri. I have no desire to be praised. You just go ahead and write what you think best. Even if you don't write, you're just as welcome. You'll find the chamberlain in his office, down the main hall, third door to your left."

Dante bowed in silence and walked slowly down the hall. Some of

the light had gone from the day. He was tasting the first bitter salt of another's bread.

The chamberlain was a busy man. It took some time before he could attend to this newcomer to the court of Verona. His business consisted in an amour he was conducting with a lady of the court much younger than himself, and whom he suspected of betraying him with one of the poet hangers-on.

"Now this is getting to be too much," he exclaimed peevishly to himself when he heard of the latest arrival. "Does our lord wish to make us a dumping ground for all the cast-off refuse of Italy? It's all very well to wish to be considered a great patron, but does he bother about where the money's coming from and the room? Not in the slightest. It's: 'My dear chamberlain, provide for this fellow, will you? He's a poet, you know.' Or, 'Here's a scholar just in from Padua. He's writing on the essence of the whatness. A learned man, indeed. See that he has a decent room.' And the poor chamberlain must scurry about like mad instead of attending to his proper business. We have as many down-at-the-heels poets hanging about as we have jesters and jugglers. And they eat more. Lord, how they eat!"

After he had vented his spleen thus and kept his new charge waiting a sufficient time, he called him. "Well, this fellow at least is decently dressed," he thought. "And they say he was a prior in Florence and ambassador to Pope Boniface." He warmed up a little.

He sucked on his thumb. "You're a poet, aren't you, Alighieri?"

Dante stiffened, and a cold light came into his eyes. What did this withered popinjay mean by addressing him thus familiarly? He was no beggar about to be thrown a contemptuous crust of bread. He was Dante Alighieri, a noble and a man of weight. If Lord Bartolommeo had spoken in this tone to him, he would have shaken the dust of Verona from his feet and slept even in the fields.

"Sir," he said with a touch of arrogance, "I am Messer Dante Alighieri of Florence, whom your master was good enough to invite to Verona. If I am a poet, it is for my own amusement. I am a noble, a soldier, and I held the highest offices in Florence."

"Well, I didn't mean anything out of the way," the chamberlain apologized, taken aback by the fierceness of this suppliant's manner. "I merely wished to know where to assign you, Messer Alighieri. You see, down one hall we place the poets. Down another are the men of learning."

"I sir, am a man of learning."

The room he was given was adequate, if small. But it was one of a series of similar cubicles and the furnishings were simple to the point

of bareness. Pompous men in long black garb strutted in and out of the other doors, their manner a strange mixture of bemused thought and sudden servility whenever some glittering courtier strode carelessly by.

Dante closed the door. The tears he had withheld burned in his eyes. Had he descended to this? Was this existence to be always his? Was he in truth about to become a scholar-beggar, like those others he had seen, humbly grateful for a place to eat and sleep?

"Oh, my Florence!" he groaned, "why have you cast me out? Why have you visited on me the unjust punishment of exile and beggary? Why must I display against my will the wound of fortune? Take me back into your bosom, oh, city. Let me live and die in Florence."

He fumbled for his ink-horn and pen-case that hung linked by a little chain from his belt, and detached some tablets. He sat down at the table and began to write:

My people, what have I done unto you?

He poured out his anguished soul on tablet after tablet. He who had never humbled himself before to any living being, not even to the Pope himself, now humbled himself to the people who had condemned him to the stake. Let me return, he implored. You are my mother. Would you disown your child for no fault of his own? Remember how I fought at Campaldino in your behalf. Never, in word or deed, did I seek to betray you. My first thought was always to your furtherance.

My people, what have I done unto you?

He sealed the letter with his tears and sent it off to Forese. "Publish it," he begged. "Let the Council see it, and the Priors. Have it read before the multitude. Use your good offices in my behalf, for the sake of all the days we spent together."

He felt a little better now. They could not resist such a plea. They'd forget their insensate anger and repent their haste. His exile would have a term, an end.

Then, since he must spend awhile in Verona, he turned with a grimace to the ode at which Bartolommeo had hinted.

He wrote in Latin, as was the custom, and employed the usual mythological panegyrics. Since the arms of the Scaligers were a golden ladder (scala) surmounted by a black Imperial eagle, he compared the great lord, Bartolommeo, to Jove's imperial eagle who soared among the stars and surveyed all earth as his domain. He wrote with unaccustomed labour and difficulty, stopping to change, to cross out, to stumble for a word. It was midnight when he had finished. He knew it was a cold and stilted ode, without value. He was tempted to tear it up; but he shuddered at commencing afresh.

The next day he found his place in the great dining hall. At the

head sat Bartolommeo della Scala, magnificent in blue velvet heavily encrusted with gold. At either side, along the great table, were seated his advisers, captains of soldiery, and courtiers. Far down towards the lower end ranged the poets, the scholars, and a miscellaneous collection of wandering minstrels, mountebanks, and travellers from other cities. Dante found his seat among them. The jester and the dwarf, he noted bitterly, were close to the ear of the lord of Verona.

When the meal was ended, a signal was given. Whereupon a seedy man who sat next to Dante arose, bowed humbly towards the head of the table, struck an attitude, and began to recite. It was an ode, full of extravagant hyperboles. Bartolommeo was Jove, grasping a thunderbolt in either hand; he was the terror and the admiration of the world; he was the sun and moon; when he spoke, the nations paused to listen. The Latin was despicable, the verse wretched, and he recited in a high, cracked voice. Nevertheless, Bartolommeo listened with a pleased air, and the courtiers hastened to applaud.

Dante followed the meter and the sentiment with astonished disgust. Never in his life had he heard such a vile piece. So he was the more bewildered by the outburst of applause.

Others followed, in the same vein. Invariably the effusions were bad. "When I was a schoolboy with Ser Brunetto," he thought, "I did far better."

It came his turn. He was the last, as he had been the latest to join the court.

Bartolommeo settled back in his chair. "Messer Alighieri is a gentleman of parts," announced the lord. "I need not call him to your attention. His *La Vita Nuova* is well known to everyone. Proceed, please."

"So I am to write as I please, or not at all," thought Dante. "But at least he called me *Messer* and a gentleman. Which is more than pertains to these wretches who have just recited."

There was a polite murmur as he rose. The courtiers examined their latest addition curiously.

They saw a man already in his middle age, his dark hair crisp and touched with grey. He was thin and stooped, but his bearing was dignified and vigorous. His brow was high and thoughtful, and his lips, once tender and open, were pressed together in stern experience and resolve. His eyes were darkest brown, almost black, and they returned their stare with undimmed pride. They stirred uneasily. Such haughty manner didn't become one who depended on the bounty of the court, who was barely a step higher than the jugglers who would follow. The poets who had already recited their odes put their faces into an attitude of severe criticism, through which jealous alarm

flickered in swift spasms. They had enough competition for the favour of the lord, without this newcomer.

Dante bowed towards Bartolommeo, disdained to smirk at the accompanying court. He took out his tablets. He hadn't wasted any time in memorizing. He was in a fury at himself and at these smirking poets who had preceded him. His was a bad enough poem, but at least the lines scanned and the Latin was impeccable. He began to read in a hard, uncompromising voice.

When he ended, he sat down abruptly. There was no applause. The poets grinned. Here was no competitor. Why, the man made their noble benefactor merely an eagle of Jove, not Jove himself! Was he mad?

Bartolommeo tapped restlessly on the table. "It is well enough," he said coldly. "But I must concede the prize for excellence to our good Alberto. What do you think, my friends?" He gazed smilingly along the table.

Instantly a hubbub of agreement arose. The chamberlain reluctantly loosened a small sack of coins and it was passed from hand to hand until it came to the seedy poet who sat next to Dante. He took it with a grin of delight and called on Heaven to behold the munificence of Verona. Dante sat like one rigid and a stone.

He met another poet later in the hall. The man said to him with a twisted mouth: "Of all things, Alighieri, to give the prize to that insufferable hack, Alberto! You know why he won? Because he acts the pander for the chamberlain."

Dante pulled his garments closer to himself. "He won," he said in acid tones, "because his ode was a trifle viler than yours, sir."

He walked away, leaving the poet trembling with astonishment and hate.

CHAPTER XVI

*Do not they of its household (the poets) surpass in renown
kings, marquises, counts, and all other magnates?*

De Vulgari Eloquentia

*O blessed those few who sit at the table where the bread of
angels is consumed, and wretched they who share the food of
sheep.*

Convivio

THE days passed, and no word came from Florence in answer to his appeal. Not even Forese wrote. The days passed, and the months, and Dante lost all hope. He had failed to soften the hearts of his people.

He resigned himself to Verona. After the first profound shock it wasn't so bad. Bartolommeo proved invariably kind and affable. He spoke to Dante frequently and displayed a sincere and intelligent interest in literature and philosophy. He even, on occasion, consulted Dante on matters of state, knowing him to have a reputation for moderation in his earlier dealings in Florence. He required no more panegyrics and moved him up the table towards the head of the learned men and immediately below the courtiers.

Dante appreciated these delicate attentions. They helped make an unbearable situation almost bearable. But what aided more than anything else was the presence of a boy of nine. He was Can Grande della Scala, younger brother of Bartolommeo, and his ordained successor to Verona.

The boy was beautiful. He had light, clear eyes and long, golden hair. Yet he wasn't effeminate. He was a manly little figure in his figured dress, small sword at his side, and there was a seated decision and understanding on his face that was far beyond his years.

The exile and the youthful heir took to each other at once. Dante remembered when he had first beheld Beatrice with eyes of adoration. Even such a one he must have been. His second son, Jacopo, was of an age with Can Grande. He winced at the reminder. It was three years since he had seen his children. What were they like now? he wondered. Had they forgotten their absent father? He didn't think of his wife, Gemma. She had borne him sons and daughters, and that was all. His marriage had not been happy and it was ended. Let her stay with her kinsmen, the Donati.

Young Can Grande would abandon his train of respectful courtiers whenever he saw Dante and come to him with delight. Dante would tell

him stories by the hour. He spoke of the great battle at Campaldino, and the boy's eyes sparkled. "When I grow up, my Dante," he exclaimed and clutched his little sword, "I'll be a great captain and win many battles."

"I don't doubt it in the slightest," Dante replied with the utmost gravity.

He spoke of Rome and of his meeting with Pope Boniface.

The boy listened. "He was a wicked, evil man, that Boniface," he said with conviction. "It's fortunate that he's dead. He went to Hell, didn't he?"

Can Grande's sudden question was like a small stone thrown into a pond. It set up ripples in Dante's imagination that spread beyond the world of life.

He had a curious vision of a flaming stone punctured with round holes, in breadth like the baptismal holes in the Baptistry at Florence. A pair of feet waved out from one, as though a man had been thrust violently in, upside down. The soles of the feet were encrusted with a lambent fire, and the hidden sufferer jerked and writhed his legs to rid him of the torture. He could not see the face or body, but he knew that it was Boniface.

He crossed himself and shuddered. Boniface had died the year before. The proud Pope whose ambition had been boundless, whose greed for money and for power had threatened the world, died in humiliation and defeat, with all his schemes tumbled about his ears. Philip of France had broken with him on the question of taxation. Boniface issued his Bull, *Unam Sanctam*, proclaiming temporal as well as spiritual sovereignty over the princes and peoples of the earth, and excommunicated the defiant king. But Philip, backed by his nation, declared Boniface a heretic and called for his deposition. Not content with mere denunciation, Philip instigated the Colonna of Rome to seize the Pope and imprison him. The people of Rome rose to free their Pontiff; but the degradation of his imprisonment and the treatment he had suffered carried Boniface off in a fever.

"His fate," Dante told the boy, "is in the hands of God."

Dante sang his early songs to the little prince. The boy hung on them, and called for endless repetitions.

"This Beatrice," he asked, "how old was she when you were first so moved by her?"

"She was almost nine; a trifle younger than you."

The boy considered a moment. "If she were alive now," he announced finally, "I would have married her when we both grew up."

"Beatrice," said Dante quietly, "is in Heaven. She has her seat among the blessed."

"I'd rather stay alive," Can Grande retorted. "When I grow up," he announced further, "you'll be my court poet and wisest counsellor." "I'll wait," Dante answered gravely.

Dante hadn't much to do with the gay court. He stood aside from the silken courtiers and the more silken ladies. They chattered too much, and their speech was idle. What had he to do with such popinjays? As for the poets, he avoided them as he would the plague. They were worse than the courtiers. They strutted more, and their jealousies were as vile as their poems.

He took to walking about Verona and meditating. He went alone, solitary, slow-paced, his face brooding and his eyes dreaming. He liked especially to slip into the Church of San Zeno when it was silent and all the more religious in its peace. He sat for hours staring at the throned marble figure of the saint, while the dying light of day poured through the windows and bathed him in diffused glory. Then, as the candles were lit and the people drifted in for vespers, he rose and went out.

It was time, he considered, that he resume life. He had been unfortunate in affairs of state; but was he not a writer? Was he not a poet? Not like those wretched versifiers who swarmed in Verona, like dogs seeking the bones from under Bartolommeo's table; but a master of his art, whom Guido Cavalcanti, Lapo Gianni, and Cino of Pistoia had hailed ungrudgingly as their leader.

The image of Guido floated before him. It was no longer terrible and accusing as it had been in the first years following his death. This was the old Guido, impetuous yet melancholy, haughty yet tender, with whom he had laughed and argued.

Yes, he thought with a sigh, kings and princes are for a day; but the true poet endures for the ages. To endure, however, requires an enduring language that is supple and excellent with life.

He straightened up so suddenly that his feet made a clatter on the stone floor of the church. He looked about guiltily. There was no one around.

Hadn't Guido said that very thing? Wasn't it he who declared that the language of the people had more of sap in it than the learned, universal Latin? Hadn't he insisted that Dante write his *La Vita Nuova* in Tuscan?

Dante sat very quietly. The hour of vespers came and the church stirred and swelled with sound. But Dante heard only the inner moving of his thoughts. If poetry were to live, if prose intended to germinate, they must cast their roots into the living tongue, the so-called vulgar tongue that the hacks who fluttered in Verona affected to despise. No

wonder their poetry was so withered and dry; it sprang not from the soil.

Latin was the proper language for philosophy, for syllogistic thought, for learned treatises to be read by all the learned folk of Europe. But poetry was emotion, and the prose of exhortation and delineation was emotion. And emotion was life; and life was of the people in their daily talk. Let the Provençals write the language of *oc*; the Parisians the tongue of *oïl*; the distant English their barbarous speech of *yes*; while the Italians must employ the dulcet vernacular of *sì*.

But the language of *sì* was split into a score of local dialects. Which, then, was the one poetically fit and proper for *all* of Italy? Ah, that called for a decision. He, Dante Alighieri, would make that decision. He would compose a treatise on the question, delving into the origins of language, examining, sifting, discussing. He would even write a critical account of the various forms of poetry—like the canzone, the sonnet, and the ballata—and determine which form fitted a particular topic.

He would call this treatise *De Vulgari Eloquentia—On the Vulgar Tongue*.

He paused a moment in his headlong thought. What irony was this? For the title which had shaped itself in his mind was not in Tuscan or other Italian dialect—it was in Latin! Was there then something wrong with his premises? A little reflection convinced him there was not. For this treatise he had in mind was a *learned* treatise, and for such he had admitted that the Latin tongue was best. Very well, then. He would compose this treatise setting forth the peculiar virtues of Italian in the learned Latin.

As he walked back to the court, and evening cast its shadows along the wooded paths, it seemed to him that Guido's shade kept steady pace with him. The face of Guido was turned to him and it smiled approval.

He began work at once. His old eagerness returned. Here was something worthy of his powers. Horace had written an *Ars Poetica* for the Latins; he would be the Horace of the Italians. He sketched his outline rapidly. There would be four books. He would proceed from an inquiry into the origins of all language to a discussion of the respective merits of the several Italian dialects. But, after a searching examination, he was certain that no one dialect in Italy would serve the purpose of a literature.

For the tongue of the Romans was a hideous jargon, and stank as did their manners and their customs; the Istrians belched forth

their words; the Sicilians drawled; the Apulians used shameful barbarisms; if the Genoese should lose the letter *z*, they'd become dumb altogether; and the Tuscans opened their mouths wide and made the strangest sounds.

Where then would he find this polished Italian he was seeking? After all, hadn't Guido, Cino, and himself written good poetry in the vernacular? He set himself to examine their songs. Excitement slowly grew within him. These poets—he included himself—had done a curious thing. They had written in Tuscan; but all unwitting, they had changed it as they wrote. Syllables were shifted, accents changed, words were polished to make the flow more even, the procession of lines more melodious. Genius had, without conscious thought, performed what he had set himself to find by reasoning. Here was his standard, universal Italian tongue.

He wrote.

Having therefore found what we were searching for, we declare the illustrious, cardinal, courtly, and curial vernacular language in Italy to be that which belongs to all the towns in Italy but does not appear to belong to any one of them. He wrote further: Its fragrance is in every town, its law is in none.

It didn't strike him that this illustrious language which he so exalted was suspiciously like the Tuscan he had just decried. Or that, in effect, it was the language of his *own canzoni*!

Bartolommeo was gratified at this sudden activity of his protégé. He had been wondering how long he'd have to feed and keep Dante without something to show for his munificence. How would the world know of his princely patronage of men of letters if they didn't yield forth fruits he might with justice call equally his own?

But there were interruptions. Bartolommeo didn't scruple to summon Dante from his work to undertake some private mission for himself. One such mission brought Dante to Padua. Here he found his young friend, Giotto.

Giotto was famous now. He had taken Cimabue's place as the foremost painter in Italy. He was married, had children, and more commissions than he could fill.

He greeted Dante with joy. "Yes," he said complacently, "I'm doing pretty well. Remember how choked with excitement I was when Florence gave me the job of doing an altar-piece?"

"It was a good piece of work, Giotto. All except for your portrait of me."

Giotto still possessed his broad, peasant grin. Success hadn't

refined him. "Still harping on that, eh?" he laughed. "You'll live through that portrait."

"I'll live through my own work," Dante said sourly.

Giotto caught the tone and surveyed his visitor more closely. "Poor Dante!" he thought. "You've changed. You look shabby and embittered with life. No wonder! Driven from Florence, parted from your family, without money, dependent on the whims of a patron for your daily bread. But I daren't offer you money. You'd be down my throat."

"You will, Dante," he said aloud. "Forgive my vanity. Your poems will be sung when my painting has cracked and fallen into ruins."

The older man was mollified. "Those poems? They were nothing. I have grander projects in mind. What work are you doing now?"

Giotto frowned. "I've been commissioned to do a series of panels depicting the Apocalypse. I'm hanged if I know where to begin!"

"The Apocalypse? That's strange! At one time I had some idea of writing a poem on that subject myself. I've dropped it, but—Let me see. Perhaps I can sketch you some of my conceptions. They might help you."

He made certain suggestions. Giotto listened eagerly. He beamed. "I believe you've struck just what I need, Messer Alighieri," he exclaimed. "I've been in a fog about it for a whole month. Will you stay in my house while you're in Padua?"

A healing wind unseamed the lines in Dante's face. Giotto had reverted without knowing to the respectful *Messer* with which he had addressed him when Dante was a famous man in Florence and Giotto was an unknown stripling.

"Naturally," he said.

In the autumn of 1306 Franceschino Malaspina, lord of Lunigiana, invited Dante to his seat at Serrezzano. Dante accepted. He was getting restless in Verona. In his treatise he had reached the second book in which he discussed the technical forms of poetry. It was a difficult, tedious discussion, and he was beginning to tire of it. The atmosphere of the court had changed, too. His aloofness and reserve had made him many enemies and no friends. The jester took to cracking nasty jokes about him; while the dwarf mimicked his walk, his stoop, and his frowning, abstracted expression. The courtiers howled with laughter at the jests and mimicry, and even Bartolommeo smiled and tossed them tidbits from his private plate. As for the fraternity of culture, they united in a common hatred for the man who refused to join their back-bittings and who so obviously considered them as beneath his contempt. It was time to move on.

Only little Can Grande was despondent at his going. "But you'll come back, my Dante," he said, brightening, "when I am lord of Verona?"

"I shall," Dante promised. "Farewell until then."

Dante found Serrezzano a place of tragic memories. Wherever he walked, the image of Guido Cavalcanti rose to greet him. It was here, exiled from Florence by the voice and vote of Dante, that Guido had sickened with the miasma and been brought back to die. In the church of San Francesco he saw Guido walking side by side with the friars. On the front of the Duomo, Guido stared at him whitely from the marble façade. He turned to the market-place and Guido rode, wraith-like and soundless, among the hucksters and the stalls. He fled outside the massive walls into the countryside. Guido floated in a boat along the gleaming Macra; and there were companions with him in the boat. They were Lapo, head thrown back in soundless laughter, Joan, and a girl whose head was averted. A youth sat beside her—his adoration in his eyes.

Dante trembled. His hands were cold and his skin was ridged. He uttered a loud cry and stumbled in his haste. He fled back to the city walls. For the girl was Beatrice—and the youth with her was himself!

He sat in his room and stared wildly. His heart had not ceased its thumping.

"It is the fever," he groaned.

But it wasn't the season for the vapours of miasma.

"It is Satan who has shown me this."

But Satan had no power over Beatrice, who was in Heaven.

"It is my cursed habit of visions," he decided. "I must not be afraid, or run away. What I have done, I have done. Wherever Guido is, he knows the truth."

That Guido was in Hell, entombed in fire among the Epicureans, he was well aware.

The Malaspini were not greatly interested in culture. The unfinished *De Vulgari Eloquentia* meant nothing to Franceschino. He wanted Dante to handle a delicate diplomatic mission for him. He had been a successful negotiator in Florence—his failure with Boniface proved nothing; no one had ever succeeded with that strong-willed Pope—and Bartolommeo had expressed satisfaction with his conduct of certain affairs.

Malaspina treated him with courtesy. He received him as a diplomat, and not as a poet.

"It makes a difference," thought Dante bitterly.

One day Malaspina called him into his private chamber. He coughed. "I have a rather ticklish affair that requires discreet handling," he said.

"I am discreet, Your Grace."

Malaspina brightened. "So I've been told. It's—ah—there's been some trouble between ourselves and our neighbour, the Bishop of Luni."

Dante waited. It had been more than trouble; it had been war. A war in which the Malaspini were coming off badly.

Malaspina cocked his eye at the ceiling. "It is sad when neighbours cannot live at peace," he observed.

"True, Your Grace."

"We've been much disturbed over this—ah—unpleasantness. After all, the Bishop is a dignitary of the Holy Church, and we have the greatest respect for the Church. If you could explain to him decently and tactfully that it is profitless for us to quarrel; yet, at the same time——" He hesitated.

"You wish peace, Your Grace," Dante completed. "At the same time you desire the return of those territories the Bishop has been rude enough to wrest from you."

Malaspina was pleased. "In effect," he agreed. "Only you must be tactful and—ah—persuasive. The Bishop is a choleric man."

"I'll be tactful," said Dante, and departed.

So persuasive was he that in two weeks of negotiation he had concluded a peace honourable beyond their hopes for the defeated Malaspini.

Malaspina praised him exceedingly. What was more to the point he gave him a round sum in gold.

Dante took the money thankfully. It was the first he held in hand since his own small store had vanished in his wanderings. He was a free man again—at least for a space of time.

He breathed deeply. "I am deeply grateful to you, Your Grace. I've worked hard in your behalf and I'm a little tired. Would it displease you if I took a little journey into the Apennines and breathed the fresh mountain air? I wish to meditate on a new book I intend fashioning."

"Not the *De Vulgari*?"

"No, Your Grace, I have in mind a more ambitious work. I intend it to be a kind of banquet of the soul for those who desire knowledge, but have never had the opportunity to attain it. I have sat at the feet of those blessed few who have seen all heaven and earth in their entirety, and it will be my undertaking to gather a few fragments of wisdom from their feast and invite those who because of family and civil cares, have been too busy to partake."

Franceschino looked askance. It sounded to him like a lot of high-flown nonsense. That was the trouble with these literary men; they inevitably returned to their vomit. Dante was an excellent agent, and he had more use for him. But it was difficult to refuse, especially since he had been incautious enough to give him money.

"Have your own way," he said peevishly.

His kinsman, Moroello, standing by, added with a smile: "You must return soon, Dante. We have need of you."

Dante bowed. "It will be a matter of a few weeks," he said. "By that time my meditations should be clarified and ready to put to paper."

Spring had come to the land when he quit Serrezzano. The warm air was wine in his nostrils and the pieces of gold clinked pleasantly in his purse. He was free to wander, to go where he pleased, to do whatever he wished, without accounting to any patron. He would, he vowed, make the best of it while the money lasted.

He rode towards the sources of the Arno, on the slopes of the Apennines. His horse kept an even pace and his thoughts revolved about the new subject he had set himself. Some day, later, he would finish his treatise, *On the Vulgar Tongue*. This new idea had intruded on him with insistent beat.

He sighed happily. He would enjoy working at it. In a way, it would be a continuation of *La Vita Nuova*. Only this would be dedicated to his Second Lady, and not his First. His brow clouded momentarily. Every so often Beatrice flashed before him. Yet it was a pale, attenuated Beatrice. He had lost the romance of youth, the capacity for worship. He was now a man of forty-two! At forty-two one's blood didn't race; there was no tender passion or exaltation in one's love.

At forty-two one adhered to the Second Lady, who is Philosophy. She was sober and sedate, and the proper companion for the middle years and age. She had comforted him when Beatrice died, and she would comfort him again.

He would take the various odes he had written to this Lady and attach explications of their meaning. But he would expand his text to comprise all knowledge. He would paint the nine heavens and point out Aristotle's error in their order. He would describe the hierarchies of angels and of seraphim, and the heavens to which they are attached and move. He would discourse on the ages of man, and the causes of nobility, and the other virtues. It would be a feast, indeed, and he would call it the *Convivio*, or *Banquet*. Yes, he would write it in Italian, for it was not for the learned, but for the common people who hungered, yet fed on grass and acorns.

It was almost evening when he reached this point in his meditations, and he had come unaware into the mountains. The small streams that move headlong down the slopes to join and make the Arno tumbled and brawled before him. He reined in his horse and looked about. It was time to find a place of shelter.

He peered through the fast-dimming light. He was in a wild place, with the mountains moving upwards in a steady thrust. There seemed no habitation or place to spend the night. The air chilled with the passage of the sun. He drew his felt *gabbano* closer to him.

Suddenly he heard movement. He turned his head and looked down the way he had come.

Climbing slowly up the narrow valley towards him were pale, white, misty figures. He shivered and crossed himself. They came closer and resolved themselves into plodding sheep. He stared at them, relieved. Where there were sheep, there was a shepherd. Where there was a shepherd, there must be at least a hut and a fire, at which to warm one's self.

Indeed, the shepherd was now approaching.

But the shepherd was a shepherdess.

CHAPTER XVII

*Her beauty has more virtue than a rock [pietra],
And her stroke may not be healed by herb,
For I have fled o'er plains and hills
That I might escape from such a woman;
But to hide me from her light comes no shadow
Of mountain, wall or tender leaf of green.*
Convivio, Ode VII

SHE paused at a little distance from him and stood motionless, her staff firm-fixed into the ground. The sun had vanished beyond the topmost peaks, and the mist rose fleecy from the well of darkness. It swam among the sheep and confused them into waves of foam. They moved indecisively at this sudden stoppage of their mistress, and their soft bleats made little puffs of smoke upon the fog.

Dante strained his eyes, but he could barely see her. The mist engulfed her waist and was climbing fast. But she seemed slim and straight, and a girl. A smock of faded green clung to her figure, and on her bare head was a wreath of twined leaves or grass. Then the white smoke moved upwards and she was a wraith, shadowy and indistinct, with white shadows swirling restlessly about her.

Dante was annoyed. The girl might have been dumb or immovable rock for all she said or did. The fog was clamp on his cloak and little droplets beaded his eyes. It would be impossible now to find his way alone.

He called to her. "Shepherd maiden, can you direct me to shelter?"

There came no answer. Only the bleating of the sheep disturbed the mountain silence. The fog had blotted the world; and he was alone, invisible even to himself.

"Why don't you answer?" he called again, this time resentfully. "What are you waiting for?"

"I'm waiting for you to get out of the path. You're blocking my sheep." Her voice was muffled by the mist, yet even so it was direct, hard, and curiously resonant.

"What a clod she is!" he thought in anger. "A brutish rock, like the mountains she inhabits."

But he swallowed his anger. Without her he was lost.

"My good maid," he said courteously, "I am a traveller and don't know your paths, especially in this fog. I must have shelter for the night. If it's a question of money——"

"I don't need money. Stand aside to your left and let my sheep pass. They're getting cold."

"Am I no better than your sheep?" he shouted.

"I don't know you. I know my sheep. Stand aside and let them pass. Then follow me."

Dante fumed, but urged his shaking horse a little up the slope. In the white smoke the sheep shouldered past like moving islands, bleating their eagerness to get home.

A taller figure drifted by. It said: "Follow behind me. Hold your horse to the left; otherwise you'll tumble down the mountainside."

"It wouldn't matter much to you," he said bitterly, as he swung his horse behind the moving shadow.

"Why should it? I don't know you."

Dante bit his lip. He was surprised to find he had no ready retort.

They climbed steadily in a world of white. At each step Dante feared a sudden plunge into the invisible depths, but he bore always to the left and the climbing shade ahead pointed the path.

They emerged at length upon what seemed a patch of level ground. The mist was thinner here, and the rising wind was whipping it to shreds. A small hut loomed dark on the stony soil, and a wattled enclosure stretched towards a straight up-thrust of cliff.

The sheep set up a joyful bleat and pressed eagerly towards the enclosure. The girl followed, encouraging them to enter with her voice and staff. Dante remained alone before the hut.

Angrier than ever he dismounted and opened the door of the hut. It was dark inside, and cold. And it was empty.

He wrinkled his nose. "Now what the devil is this?" he wondered. He waited impatiently for the girl's return.

She came finally. The sheep made little contented sounds within their stockade.

"You might at least," he greeted her sarcastically, "have shown your hospitality first to your guest."

"My sheep come first. There are wolves about."

"Oh! Then where can I keep my horse?"

"In the enclosure with the sheep."

"He'll suffer from cold."

"It won't hurt him."

"And feed?"

"There's a little hay close to the gate."

Since she made no move to take the horse, he himself led the beast inside.

"Mind you bar the gate," she called after him.

"This girl is a queer sort of savage," he thought. "But when her father comes——"

He tended his horse as best he could and hurried back. The door was closed, and smoke sent its acrid fumes out of the hole pierced in the roof. He opened the door and entered.

Her back was bent away from him as she knelt by the open hearth. The place was filled with smoke, and he coughed. It stung his eyes and throat. She didn't turn. Little tongues of fire commenced to show between the faggots. They shot up and made a single blaze. The smoke thinned through the opening and the place grew warm.

He stared around. The hut was rude. It was made of interwoven withes, and clay daubed the chinks. The floor was the earth itself. There were no benches, tables, or beds. Not even heaps of straw. A wooden bowl hung on the wall, and two battered pots. That was all.

With a grimace Dante returned his gaze to the girl. She was still busy with the fire.

Her smock had ridden above her knees. It had once been green, and it was patched in many places. Her legs were bare, and so were her feet, in spite of the mountain chill. They were smooth, brown, and well-shaped, with the faint lines of scratches where she had gone through brambles. His gaze moved upwards.

On her hair still rested the wreath. It was made of interwoven grass, and tiny mountain flowers peeped white and yellow through the green. But his eyes clung to her hair. It was a ripe gold, tumbling down her neck and over her shoulders. No comb had touched those luxuriant locks, nor any of the aids that the ladies he had known were accustomed to use. But the red fire danced and sparkled in the strands, and made a dazzlement in his eyes. He stirred uneasily.

"There!" she said. "The fire is made." And arose.

As she turned, he started in amazement.

"She's beautiful!" he gasped to himself. "Her eyes are green—like emeralds! like the sea!" he cried.

Fear moved in him like a tide. Had Beatrice returned to earth in this strange guise? Were the ancients right who claimed that the souls of those who died re-embodied themselves in further incarnations? Or were the demons who were known to haunt the mountains making mock of him?

She paid no attention to his start or to his muttered gasps. She took a pot from the wall, poured into it cold gruel, and set it on the fire. The contents began to bubble.

He followed every move she made with fixed intensity. He was trembling, though the hut was already uncomfortably warm. No, it was not Beatrice. The white purity of the one was here a brown of

wind and sun and weather. The slender grace and noble bearing of Beatrice was here transmuted into a supple, springy, hardened body that might have belonged to an active boy. Except in one particular. His eyes clung to the smock as it tightened across her breasts. The bulges were round and unmistakable. The modest robes of Beatrice had made no display; even in his dreams he had never thought of her as being thus a woman.

She snatched the pot off the fire. She took the wooden bowl and poured the steaming mixture in.

"If you wish some——" she said indifferently.

He took it from her hands in silence. Her arms were bare to the elbows, and as smoothly moulded as her legs. She gave him a wooden spoon.

"And you?" he asked.

"When you're finished."

He gulped the mixture quickly. He was hungry. He handed back the scraped bowl and she filled it for herself and began to eat. He watched her. The warmth of the gruel and of the fire ran through him.

Since she was not disposed to talk, at length he said, "When do you expect your father?"

"My father?"

"Your brother, then."

"I have no brothers. My father stays in the valley to plant the spelt."

"You stay here alone?"

"Why not?"

"Well—I don't know," he ended in despair.

"I'm not afraid of the wolves," she volunteered. "They're cowards."

There are other kinds of wolves, he thought, but held his peace.

They had eaten, and there was nothing more to say. She placed more faggots on the fire and ringed it so it would burn more slowly. Then, without another word, she wrapped herself in a sheepskin and lay down on the earthen floor.

Dante was embarrassed. "Where shall I sleep?" he inquired.

"Sleep? Wherever you wish. The hut is big enough." She closed her eyes and instantly her regular breathing showed the soundness of her slumber.

Dante stared, fascinated. The red light flickered over her sleeping face and tangled in her golden hair. This was the strangest situation in which he had ever been. It was customary among peasants to sleep all in one room—male and female—since they had no more. But always there was a husband, father, or brother present when a guest partook of the common quarters. But here——

The fire died to a glow of embers. Shadows settled on the walls. Shaking his head, he wrapped his *gabbano* closer and lay down on the hard earth.

His sleep was restless, and he had dreams.

When he awoke, it was still dark. The fire was out. But a paling on the mountains announced the approach of dawn. He yawned, shook himself, and arose. The stony ground hadn't been tender to his bones. He was no longer young, he reflected.

Awareness of his surroundings came slowly to him, and memory of the night before. He looked around. The girl was gone. He went outside. The sky was surging with pinkish light. He walked to the enclosure. The sheep were also gone. But his horse whinnied pleasure at the sight of its master.

He led it out and arranged its saddle. Then he returned to the hut. He took a silver florin from his purse and laid it on the ground where it was certain to be seen. The night's lodging and the wretched gruel, if they were to be paid for, were certainly not worth more than a single denarius. Nevertheless he let it be.

Everything was in readiness now for his departure. His horse was saddled and had grazed in the fresh spring grass. The path ran unmistakably into an upland valley. He had intended going on to Poppi. He had left a more than ample donative for the crude hospitality.

Yet he hesitated. He was disturbed. Where the devil was the girl? It wasn't courteous, he told himself, to leave without at least a word of thanks.

Obedying a sudden impulse he tied his horse to the door and walked the downward path. The breeze stirred and the air was keen and fresh.

He came upon her in a little valley, from which the mountains rose tumultuous. The sheep were grazing along the green and flowery slopes, and the girl sat on a rock, staff in hand, as though she were part of the stone beneath her.

She turned swiftly at his approach. Her face betrayed no sign of anything.

"She's more beautiful by day," thought Dante. "How smooth and rich is the blood beneath her brown!"

She turned away again and resumed her former pose.

Dante felt sorry now he had come. He cleared his throat. He who had passed by the high-born ladies of Verona's court with cold reserve began to stammer before this mountain girl of eighteen.

"I—I didn't wish to go with—without thanking you for the shelter."

"You needn't," she said shortly.

"Well—I——" It dawned on him he didn't know her name. "What is your name?" he asked abruptly.

"Pietra."

"Pietra?" He essayed a pleasantry. "Do you mean Pietra—a rock, or Pietra—a gem?"

"Just Pietra."

He tried again. "How far is it to Poppi?"

"I don't know."

"But surely——"

"I've never been out of the mountains."

She was like a wild flower, he thought, rooted in the soil of these hills.

"Don't you ever get lonely?"

"Why should I? I have the sheep."

"But sheep cannot speak."

"They speak to me." It was the first time he had seen her animated. She pointed to a ram. The bearded beast had lifted its head. It snuffed the wind and its bleat took on a hoarser note. "See!" she said. "He's saying there's snow coming. Within an hour it's going to snow."

Dante looked up at the sky. It was blue and cloudless, and the risen sun poured warmth into the valley.

"How can it?" he protested. "This is April and it's hot."

"He never lies," she said quietly. "It will be a blizzard."

She rose and called to the sheep. They left the succulent grass unwillingly, but her staff brooked no delay. She herded them up the steep path, though it was still morning, and they had fed but little.

Dante followed behind her. He followed with a strange reluctance, as though he too were a sheep driven from the succulent grass. Once back at the hut he must decently go.

As they climbed the last turn to the upland valley, clouds rolled overhead. The air turned into a wind, and the wind into a blast. It poured and howled with icy trumpets down the steep decline. The black clouds stormed the sky above, and boiled in furious cauldron. Barely had they reached the top when the snow came slantwise at them, until the air was a swirling shroud of white.

He struggled to her side to help her pen the snow-crueted sheep. "You see," she laughed, and it was strange how the laugh transformed her face from sculptured stone to mobile, girlish flesh, "how my ram speaks?"

"He speaks better than most human folk I know," he assented. Then, suddenly, "But how can I travel on in this fearful storm?"

"Stay if you wish." Once more her voice was indifferent, as though

it didn't matter what he did. She went with bare feet through the mounting snow to the hut, emerged with an ancient sheepskin. "Put this on your horse," she shouted through the blasts. "He's not used to mountain weather."

Dante took it thankfully, flung it over the shivering beast, and placed him in the enclosure. By the time he came back to the hut, the fire was going and a haunch of kid was roasting in the faggots.

He sniffed appreciatively. "How long do these spring snowstorms last?" he asked.

"Sometimes a day. Sometimes a week."

"Holy Virgin!" he gasped.

She misunderstood. "There's food enough," she said. "I keep it buried under the hut, so the wild things can't get at it."

"You're something of a wild thing yourself," he thought.

For three days the storm raged. On the fourth the sun came out and magically the snow began to melt. The valley stood knee-deep in water, and the path was a sluicing torrent.

"In a few days everything will be dry again, so a horse can travel," she said.

Dante would have preferred it to be a month, a year, for ever. He no longer hid the truth from himself. He had fallen in love with this half-savage girl of the mountains, this Pietra.

It was more than love—it was a strange and terrible passion. It was like nothing that had ever happened to him before. For Beatrice he had felt a sexless worship, an adoration fit for angels. For Gemma it was mere gratitude returned for pity. But for this young, untamed creature of the mountains——!

He was mad! he told himself again and again. What had he, the ageing Dante Alighieri, the man of learning and of genius, whose fame still rang, albeit a trifle muted, on the plains beneath, the noble with a price upon his head, to do with this girl of barely eighteen, who knew not one letter from another? But he spoke in vain.

Whenever he looked into the green of her eyes, sparks issued that kindled flames within his heart. Whenever he viewed the golden shimmer of her hair, his hand trembled to seize upon those locks and wrap them in a frenzy round himself. Whenever he stared at those too-clearly defined mounds, the blood scattered through his veins and raced shrieking to the heart that summoned it.

Each night as he lay on the stony earth and hearkened to her breathing his hands grew hot and his mouth parched. If she but made a sign, if but once her eyes softened as she looked at him, if she would sigh and say something in her sleep——!

But she made no sign. Her eyes surveyed him with the same indifferent calm that she used for the mountains and the sheep. Her sleep was deep and quiet as a child's.

She went out each day, her bare legs equally indifferent to the snow and icy torrents, when Dante, the man, knew he'd catch his death of wet if he should venture out.

He paced the hut like a caged beast. There was a fever in him that burned and burned. He sought to assuage it with composing odes. He wrote a Mountain Song:

*My little mountain Song, thou go'st thy way,
And Florence, my fair city, thou may'st see,
Which 'gainst me bars her gates,
And is of pity stript, of love devoid.
If thou within her walls should'st enter, say:
Warfare against my lord henceforth is vain,
For where I left him by a chain he's bound,
So strong, that, should your cruelty relent,
Here to return he is no longer free.*

He enclosed it in a letter addressed to Moroello Malaspina, who had requested his early return. "For fear that the master should have no knowledge of the captivity of the servant," he began. Love, he continued, imperious and terrible, "slew that praiseworthy determination in the strength of which I held aloof from women, those instruments of his enchantment; and the unbroken meditations wherein I was pondering on things both of heaven and earth, he relentlessly banished."

But there was no way of sending either letter or poem to Moroello.

As the days passed, his passion grew. He began to woo this girl. He told her that her hair was a shining splendour and her eyes shamed the mountain pools. She stared at him and turned to her sheep.

He told her that in her form had been gathered all beauty's light, that the sun turned pale when he shone on her for envy at his dimness. She looked up at the sun and said: "What nonsense! The sun's as bright as ever."

He said she was a lucent gem (*pietra*) whose rays had a virtue more wonderful than diamond and ruby.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she answered.

"You're not a gem," he cried in exasperation. "You're a thing of stone (*pietra*), a rock as cruel as these mountains."

Pietra looked at her mountains. "They're not cruel," she said simply. "They're kind to me, like sisters."

He changed his wooing. He spoke of himself. He was Messer Dante Alighieri, late of Florence.

She had never heard of him.

He magnified his achievements, he who had always thought self-speaking one of the major sins. He told of the battles in which he had partaken, the way in which he had confronted the mighty Boniface himself, of Florence, Rome, and Verona, of courtiers and fine garments.

She listened with a serious air, and he hoped he had made progress. "I prefer my mountains and my sheep," she said when he had ended.

In desperation he cast away all stratagems and spoke plainly.

"I love you, Pietra. I want you for my own."

She stared at him a moment; then she began to laugh. Her laugh was free and wild, and echoed from the mountains until all Nature seemed to join in endless reverberations of laughter.

"What the devil are you laughing at?" he asked, nettled.

Her face was merry like a child's; her laughter didn't cease.

"At you!" she cried. "Why, you're an old man. I didn't think that old men could——" She laughed until the tears came to her eyes. "See that old ram?" she pointed. "It's been years since he has touched a ewe."

Dante was appalled at the candour and the insult.

"How dare you compare me to a doddering ram!" he almost shouted in his wrath. Then he changed his tone and pleaded. "I'm not old, Pietra. I'm in the prime of manhood. I'm forty-two."

She wrinkled her nose. "Oh, but that's *very* old!"

Had Dante not been mad, he would have desisted then. His pride writhed under the girl's plain dealing. It writhed; yet he abased himself even further. He took out his purse. The golden florins of the Malaspirini made a satisfying roundness.

"If you'll forget my age, Pietra, these are yours." He took them out and poured them gleaming into the palm of his hand.

Her glance at all the glitter was calm. "We need no money, my sheep and I," she said. "We eat, we drink, we sleep soundly. Do we require more?"

He put his purse away, ashamed. He had fallen low in degradation. Yet he would fall still lower to possess her.

And each night, in spite of knowledge of his torment and desire, she lay down in the hut and slept with peaceful innocence, while Dante tossed and burned a mere few feet away. There were times when his passion so overmastered him that he was tempted to throw himself upon this girl of ice and stone and force her. Once he had half-risen. His breath came hoarse and rapid. Then he heard her breathing. It was quiet, regular, innocent.

"Save me, blessed Virgin!" he moaned and shrank back from what

he had intended. In remorse and revulsion he vowed that on the morning he would quit this place of temptation.

The morning came. The roads were dry now, and there was no excuse for remaining. Yet he stayed.

On the thirteenth day her father came up the mountain. He was a stolid peasant, smelling of cows and the wormy ground in which he grubbed. On his back he carried a sack of meal for his daughter. He showed no surprise at the sight of Dante, but he bowed low and humbly, knowing from his horse, his sword, and accoutrements that this was a guest of noble birth.

"Have things gone well, Pietra?" he asked.

"Well enough, Father. The ewes have dropped eight lambs. Six more are big enough to drop their loads by the beginning of the month. The wolves came one night and took a new-born lamb, but I drove them off with burning torches before they could seize any more. The old ram is getting lame, and the younger ones chase him all the time. All in all, we'll have a good season."

He took her aside. "Who is this man?" he asked.

"Some traveller whom the storm caught in the mountains," she replied indifferently.

"But the storm is long over."

"Oh, well, he stays on. He makes love to me; he's even offered money. He's such a funny old man." And she went off into laughter.

"Money, did you say?" The peasant's eyes glistened. "Much money?"

"It seems like much. He poured it in his hand one day."

"Was it gold?"

"All gold."

"Ah!" breathed her father, and said no more.

Later, towards evening, he approached Dante. He bowed respectfully.

"You like my Pietra?" he asked.

"I've told her so already," Dante answered shortly.

A crafty look came into the old man's eyes. "You would perhaps be willing to pay something?" persisted the old man. "Say, ten gold florins?"

"I offered her thirty," said Dante, still more shortly. He didn't like this conversation.

"Thirty florins! Holy Virgin!" The old man extended a dirty palm. It trembled with eagerness. "Give me the thirty, Your Grace, and you may have your will tonight."

"She's refused me."

"Oh, these girls! What do they know? Give me the money and you

needn't fear. If I have to beat her with a stick, she'll submit. She's never had dealings with a man before." He came closer, so that his breath stank in Dante's nostrils. "She's a virgin; a tender, untouched virgin. I swear it!"

Shame flooded Dante. He had descended into such a mire of degradation that this foul panderous father considered himself an equal. And was he not? Did they not both wallow in the same filth? He drew back in fierce disgust. "I do not buy my love," he said with loathing.

The peasant looked bewildered. "But you already offered, didn't you?"

"I did; and I writhe in shame for it. I've changed my mind."

"It isn't fair, Your Grace, to withdraw. I'm a poor peasant. Thirty florins would give my daughter the finest dowry in all the mountains. There isn't a brave young lad for miles around that wouldn't come running to marry Pietra with such a dowry." He came closer again. "You can lie with her for a week, a month, for such a sum."

"Get out!" shouted Dante.

"But, Your Grace——"

"Get out, I say, you foul pander of a father!" He clapped his hand to his sword. "Get away from me before I soil my blade in your wretched flesh."

The old man backed away in alarm. Holy Virgin! What was the matter with these unpredictable gentlemen?

Dante turned and almost stumbled back to the enclosure. He'd leave this very moment. He had lusted and he had wallowed. He'd forgotten his high mission. The *Banquet*—the feast of reason—had remained but a meditation. Feast of reason, indeed! he thought bitterly. Who was he to write of angel hierarchies and the moving procession of the spheres? Instead of heaven and earth, he had composed odes of dismal passion, in which his lacerated flesh had cried aloud its suffering. Pietra! Pietra! He had rung the changes on that name, and blazoned his madness for all the world to read and mock. By San Giovanni, he'd tear up every tablet and erase his shame thereby! And he'd leave at once.

But the sun had plunged behind the mountains, and night rolled swiftly down the valley. Up the path from the lower meadow came the home-plodding sheep, and their shepherdess, Pietra.

He paused. It was too late. He would leave in the morning. Nor did he destroy the odes he had fashioned.

That night he tossed again. The girl slept as usual. Her father shrank into the farthest corner from him. He was afraid of this crazy noble who had threatened him with his sword. The fire died; and with

its death the snores of the old man filled the hut with unpleasant sound.

Dante winced and stared into the darkness. His whole life rolled before him. His dreams, his hopes, his ideals. They had come to this. A middle-aged lecher, grovelling in his lechery. Would God forgive him? Would——?

His hair stood on end. The hut filled with sharp, keen light. Beatrice stood before him.

"Beatrice!" he moaned, and would have shut his eyes against the keenness of that light. But his lids refused to close, and the splendour was like knives upon his eyes. It had been years since Beatrice had come to him.

"Yes, it is Beatrice," she said. A terrible wrath was on her face. A mighty anger blazed in her eyes.

"Once before I sought to lead you safe out of the dark wood in which you stumbled. I showed you the way to the Mount of Salvation. But the beasts which have ever gone before you blocked the path and forced you to turn aside. You had not faith enough, nor love enough for me to slay them as you went."

"What beasts are they?" he whispered.

"You know them well. They've been your constant companions since you quit the innocence of youth. The Lion of Pride, with head erect and furious with hunger; the She-Wolf of greed, full of all cravings in her leanness; and now, the spotted Leopard, whose filthy lusts have caught you in her toils."

"Rid me of these terrible beasts, most gracious Beatrice!" he groaned. "And set my erring feet once more upon the path direct."

"I don't know why I should. I've left my blessed seat in Heaven enow in your behalf. What pits opened on your path, what chains held you fast, that you must needs strip yourself of the hope of passing onward?"

He sighed and wept. "The lure of present things, aghter with false pleasure, turned me aside as soon as your face was hidden."

She shook her head. "Was I then held so cheap? If I were pleasant in the mortal flesh, am I not far more desirable in immortal splendour?"

"You are!" He flung his hands towards her imploringly. "You are!"

"Then harken to me. If the gracious Lucia, who once cured you of your earthly blindness, had not interceded, I would not now make this fresh attempt to rid you of this far worse blindness."

"What must I do?"

"You are far sped, Dante. You must pass first through the agonies of the damned and shudder at where you were heading. You must climb in penitence, painfully and slow, and remove, one by one, the marks the beasts

have placed upon you. Then, and then only, will the Mount of Salvation beckon you again."

He would have answered, but the light was gone, and Beatrice with it. Darkness made a shroud within the hut, and the snorings of the peasant grated on his ears.

Before it was morn, while the stars still glittered thick upon the sky, he arose softly. Pietra and her father were asleep. He took his purse and counted out thirty florins in the dark. Quietly he laid them by the hearth. Then he moved noiselessly outside and stumbled towards the enclosure. He saddled his horse and mounted.

As he turned down the mountain path, up which he had laboured two weeks before, he heard a stirring in the hut. He put his horse to the gallop, heedless of precipice and yawning chasm.

The stars paled, and the sun of the new day flashed long lances of light overhead.

CHAPTER XVIII

*Now canst thou see, my son, the sorry jest
Of those good things committed unto Fortune
For which men buffet men in brutal quest.
For all the gold that is beneath the moon,
Or ever was, of all these weary souls
Could not bring ever peace to any one.*

Inferno

THE Malaspini greeted him with marked suspicion. "Where have you been?" asked Franceschino. "You said you were going to Poppi. Yet someone just came from Poppi and said you weren't there."

"I lost my way in the mountains," replied Dante enigmatically.

"Hmmm! It's a long time to be lost. But there's a letter waiting for you. An old Jew brought it."

Dante opened the seal. It was from Immanuel. He had been forced to flee Rome because of his debts, he wrote. Fortunately his sister, Rebecca, was married to an orthodox young Talmud scholar. Not too much money, to be sure, but enough of piety.

"As I lived, Dante," he proceeded earnestly, "I did not possess piety even to the extent of half a barley-corn. Until yesterday I had taken lust as my wedded wife. As form is joined to substance, so was I joined to lust, which removed from my head the crown of modesty which once was mine. Had I not felt shame before my God, and feared to be abhorred by His holy people, I should have built an altar in honour of every fair damsel. But now, oh, Dante, I turn to piety and will not permit myself to be intoxicated by the love of strange women. I bitterly lament my erotic poems and wish they could be forgotten. Unfortunately, the people of my faith refuse to believe my repentance to be sincere."

He led a wandering life, he wrote, and was compelled to sing his verses for a supper. But he had heard of a rich and generous patron in Fermo, and he was heading there.

"And I, too, Immanuel," said Dante aloud, "only yesterday took lust for my wedded wife, and today have turned to piety."

He was struck by the resemblance between this Jew of Rome and himself. Each wandered in exile, seeking a patron. One had been driven by the fire; the other by his debts. Each sought precarious living through the entertainment of his verses. But he, Dante, had an intercessor and a true God. What did the Jew have? If only Immanuel would turn to Jesus Christ and admit him as his Saviour. Therein lay

his sole hope for salvation. But he knew Immanuel and the pride he hid under a cloak of cynicism. He had rejected all gods. If he returned, it would be only to the God of his own fathers. He had spoken with contempt of those Jews who, from fear or hope of gain, had yielded to the Christian God.

Dante put the letter carefully away. What was he to do now? The vision that had been so clear in the night now held mysteries insoluble. What had Beatrice meant by the path through agonies eternal and the slow ascent through penitence? He called on her for aid, for explanation. But Beatrice appeared no more. She had spoken enough, and it was for Dante to unravel the mystery if he wished to be saved.

He meditated long and deeply. If he wished to be saved! There was nothing he wished more passionately and devoutly. But how? Lady Beatrice, tell me plainly—how?

The summer passed, and the autumn came, and still he lingered at the court of Malaspini. He worked at his *Convivio*. He deepened its programme as his own thoughts deepened. He discoursed on the relations between Church and Empire. Boniface had sought sole rule and failed. But his sin lived after him. The Church, bound and bleeding, had been dragged off in triumph to Avignon by the king of France. And the Empire equally lay bound in chains of its own devising. Would the day come when these two, Church and Empire, would break their bonds and rule together in harmony and strict division?

He wrote elaborate commentaries on the odes he had once written to his second Lady, Philosophy. She was now in truth the second, since Beatrice had appeared to him again. While preparing these odes, he came across the recent ones addressed to Pietra. He started to tear them up. But curiosity overcame him to re-read and note how bad they were.

When he finished reading, he was surprised. They were good poems; as good as any he had done. The poet in him rose in outcry. It would be sinful to destroy such splendid work.

But they betrayed his period of shame and degradation. How could he face a sneering world with poems such as these? This posed a problem. Why couldn't he, he asked himself, weave them into the structure of the *Convivio* and explain them by means of commentary? Suppose he maintained that these so earthly songs were in fact addressed to that same Lady Philosophy. He had sighed for her and anguished; but for a while she had been cruel and denied her presence to him as any stone. He nodded. They were allegories, not statements of fact. He soon began to believe this himself.

In October news came from Florence. Corso Donati, his greatest

enemy, had in his usual manner quarrelled with his fellow Blacks. In the tumult that followed he was forced to flee Florence, and had died at the hands of his pursuers.

Dante's first thought was that now perhaps he would be permitted to return. But the victorious faction of the Blacks refused to lift the ancient sentences against the exiles. Worse news followed fast.

Malaspina called Dante to his chamber. His face was grave, his manner agitated. He commenced abruptly.

"The new heads of Florence have made demand on me to yield you to them, Alighieri. Their ambassadors arrived this morning with the demand. They claim you continue to conspire against their city."

"That isn't so," Dante protested. "Your Grace knows that I've been busy with my books, and with nothing else."

Malaspina shook his head. "I told them as much, but they are insistent."

"What will you do?"

"I'm sorry, Alighieri, sincerely sorry. I would like to tell them to be off about their business; but I'm not in a position now to fight the Florentines."

Dante stood very still. Already he could feel the flames surging around his limbs, and hear the yells of the greedy populace come to watch the spectacle.

"How long did they give you to reply?" he asked.

"Until tomorrow morning."

"Suppose," he said slowly, "I go secretly tonight. Would you pursue?"

"I'm no executioner," retorted Malaspina. "If you're quit of my domain by morning, I could disclaim all knowledge of your escape." He rose, obviously relieved. "If you need any money——"

"I've taken enough of your bounty. I'll take no more."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know," Dante answered dully.

He packed in haste. His *Vita Nuova*. His unfinished treatise, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. His present work, the *Convivio*. He held the pages with their neat, precise script in his hand a moment. Very likely this, too, would remain unfinished. Was he doomed never to complete anything? Even the *Vita Nuova* had ended on a note of expectancy, as though it were the mere prelude for a greater, mightier task.

He sighed and placed the pages of the *Convivio* with his other things. He was forty-three and life was ended. He was a hunted man, a fugitive with no place to put his head in safety. Wherever he went, the

vindictive people of his city would search him out and make demands. Who was there among the counts and princes who would protect this Dante Alighieri at the cost of war? No one.

But there was no present time for thought. Should he be found within the domains of the Malaspinini by the morning no friendly pity would save him.

He remained close-barred within his chamber until the night. The Florentine ambassadors no doubt had set spies to watch him. When all was dark and quiet, he cautiously opened his window, threw his travel pouch down into the garden and let himself softly down upon the ground. Fortunately his room was on the first floor of the palace.

The pouch was heavy, but the weight came from manuscripts and books, not from wealth or personal belongings. He wore the grey, simple garb of a pilgrim, and a pilgrim staff was in his hand. On his head was a close-fitting hat, and the pouch slung over his shoulder. From the belt that gathered his gown hung the indispensable tools of his calling—inkhorn, pen, and tablets. Since it was getting on to winter he took the felt *gabbano* to shield him from the weather.

He dared not seek his horse in the palace stables. Without doubt spies were lurking there to watch this easy avenue of escape and organize pursuit to overtake him. He must wander on foot.

He moved quietly through the garden. No one was stirring. The palace was dark in sleep. Luckily the moon was full and made a shining path of silver.

When he came to the point where the road led south and north, he paused. Which way? On this decision rested life and future.

To the south lay Tuscan land, dependent on Florence or chiefly in the hands of the Blacks. Even if he made his way to the coast, there was no way of taking ship. He had three gold florins in his purse, and a handful of silver denari. He thought of the thirty florins he had left within the mountain hut of Pietra. They would have stood him well in this time of need. Yet he didn't regret the gesture. It was a penance for the lust that had been within his heart.

To the north lay the mountains of the Apennines; and beyond, the mightier Alps. It was coming on winter. Nevertheless, the northern path was the safer. He pulled his *gabbano* close and started along the northern road. His staff came down with steady thud upon the dust-thick earth. His stooped shoulders stooped the more under the weight of his pouch. The moon rode high and poured its cold, un pitying splendour on his weary way.

He was a homeless wanderer—on earth and in eternity.

By morning he barely stumbled over the border and reached the slopes of the Apennines. He had escaped the first pursuit.

But when the Florentines discovered his flight, they would send emissaries to scour in all directions. There was the peril of assassination or further demands for his captivity.

He begged his morning bread at the first peasant house to which he came. The men were in the fields. The woman gave him the stale end of a loaf and a cup of milk. He seemed another of the many begging pilgrims who roamed the countryside incessantly.

He ate the crust and drank the milk. He was deathly tired and grey with dust and fatigue. But he dared not ask for shelter, for fear the spies might find him. He thanked the woman and walked, stumbling, towards a thicket. He burrowed within the tangled bushes and stretched himself to sleep.

It was afternoon when he awoke. His bones ached and he was more tired than before. But he must go on.

He drank from a stream and took to the road again. It led through the lower hills towards the Mediterranean. He walked wearily, leaning more and more upon his staff. The books seemed heavier, but he did not dream of throwing them away. On their contents, finished and unfinished, lay his sole hope of future knowledge among men.

Each time a horseman galloped past, he lowered his face to the road, fearing a Florentine. But the horsemen paid no attention to the bowed and plodding figure. The others on the road were the usual peasants with their carts, pilgrims, armed groups of merchants with their laden mules. The pilgrims greeted him and sought conversation. But his replies were scant and they quit him, resentful of such discourtesy.

It was close to evening when he ascended another long, seemingly interminable slope. His feet were sore and swollen, and his steps lagged more and more.

"Where, oh God, are you leading me?" he groaned.

With a last burst of failing energy he stumbled to the crest. The Mediterranean sparkled blue and gold beneath, flooded with the last rays of the sun. He leaned upon his staff, panting. His eyes were vacant on the beautiful scene. He required food and shelter. His stomach was pinched and empty, and the evening wind whistled cold through his *gabbano*.

As he stood there, chilled and hungry, a bell tolled. Never had vespers and the sweet chime of bells seemed more lovely. Where there were bells in the mountains there was a monastery.

He gathered his failing strength and plodded further, around the curve of the hill. The grey walls that nestled against the slope and turned their austere lines towards the distant sea were more beautiful to him than any palace or lordly church in Florence.

He made his way to the quiet door for pilgrims and travellers. He raised his staff and knocked.

There was a minute's silence, for it was the hour of vespers and the monks were gathered in prayer.

He knocked again. He was so tired he swayed and almost fell.

The door opened and a monk stood in the doorway. The last, expiring ray tintured his tonsure into a crown of gold.

"What do you wish?" inquired the monk courteously.

Dante stared at the grey walls of the monastery. They seemed to blur and move, and yet he gazed with an inexpressible yearning. They beckoned to him as they swayed. "Come to us, oh, weary wanderer," they said. "Here is rest for your body and peace for your immortal soul."

The monk gazed afresh at this dusty, road-stained pilgrim who stared so fixedly and didn't answer.

"What do you desire?" he asked again.

Dante passed his hand over his eyes.

"Peace!" he said hoarsely. "Peace!"

"Here is peace," said the monk. "In our monastery there is only peace. Will you enter?"

Dante followed him to the refectory where travellers were entertained.

"Yes, that is what I wish," he thought. "Peace—evermore!"

There was no other wayfarer in the refectory. The monk said nothing further. He brought him water with which to wash his hands and lave his swollen feet. He set before him food and drink. Dante crossed himself and sat down on the bench before the plain, but substantial fare. He ate as one hungry, but too tired to eat.

The monk watched him curiously. What manner of man was this weary pilgrim who, when questioned, responded only with a despairing cry for *peace*?

He observed the strong and suffering face, the deep lines of passion and of old experience that furrowed brow and weary cheeks, the bold jut of nose, the proud, veiled eyes, the black beard beneath the compressed lips that barely opened to partake of food.

"This is no ordinary man," he thought. "He has seen much and endured much." His curiosity mounted.

When Dante ended his meal he looked up at the silent monk.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"This is the Monastery of Santa Croce del Corvo. We are of the Camaldolese. You are in Lunigiana."

Dante nodded and said no more.

The monk burned with curiosity. "I am Fra Ilario," he volunteered. "Do you wish to tell your name?"

Dante sighed. "I am Dante Alighieri, a Florentine by birth but not by character."

Fra Ilario started, as much from the strangeness of the reply as from his knowledge of the man. This was indeed no ordinary visitor.

"Are you not that Alighieri," he inquired, "who disputed with His Holiness, Pope Boniface, since gone to his eternal reward?"

The veil lifted from Dante's eyes. "Boniface was neither holy nor a true pope," he said fiercely. "His election was a nullity and he lusted after things of the earth, and not of heaven. He's gone to eternal reward, it's true; but it's not the reward he expected."

The good monk crossed himself. He was shocked. What talk was this within the precincts of a monastery? But curiosity overpowered dismay. He glanced around to see if any of his brethren had heard this terrible speech. They were alone in the refectory.

"I will not dispute with you, Messer Alighieri," he said humbly. "I am a poor monk and trouble myself little with the outside world. I say my daily prayers and do the work assigned me by our abbot, and am content. But," he added in a lower voice and again glanced surreptitiously around, "I read in my cell after the day's work is ended and my prayers are done. I read in the books of the Fathers and the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. I also read, on occasion, secular poems." He appeared shamefaced. "I know it's in the nature of a sin, but our abbot is kind and forbearing. He says it's only a little sin, and lets me off with a few paternosters. I've read some of your sonnets, Messer Alighieri."

"Have you, indeed?" Dante brightened.

"They are good sonnets," Fra Ilario pursued hurriedly. "Not like some others I have read and quickly set aside for shame. They breathe an air of piety and devotion."

Dante was glad that he hadn't distributed copies of his sonnets on Pietra.

"I am happy to hear you say so," he said.

"Only——"

"Only what?"

The monk hesitated. "There is a little too much of the world about them. You praise your Beatrice before even the good God Himself. Oh, I know," he added hastily, "it is the mode. But I would have wished," he said with a wistful air, "that you wrote more of God and His marvellous creation and less of a single mortal creature."

"Beatrice is now with God, and not the least of His creatures," Dante countered softly.

"We are all the least of His creatures," said the monk.

Dante indicated his pouch that rested on the floor. "I have one manuscript there, not yet ended——" He stopped and his face was sad. "I don't know now if it ever will be ended. In that writing I speak of the works of God, of the movement of the heavens, of the nature of substance and of matter."

"I don't mean that. Such writing is Philosophy, and it deals with created things, and not with the Creator. I would have you deal—forgive me for saying so—with the search of mortal man for Almighty God, his struggles and despairs, his hopes and rejoicings. Lead him through sin and suffering until he comes, safe and saved, to the blessed presence of the Holy Trinity."

Dante was struck with the monk's suggestion. Had not Beatrice, in his vision, spoken of similar things? Was Beatrice, perhaps, speaking to him once again through the lips of a simple monk? Something glimmered in his mind. A tiny spark that flickered and didn't glow. He sat in silence, face stern and rapt, trying to fan that spark into a flame.

"You aren't angry with me, Messer Alighieri," the monk asked in a timid voice. "It is only something I thought of, sitting in my cell." He sighed. "Had I myself the pen——"

Dante rose. "Offended? Fra Ilario, you have planted a seed. If the seed should ever germinate, I shall send you its fruit."

"I am but an instrument in God's hands," said the monk joyfully.

"We are all instruments," said Dante. "If you will be good enough to show me some straw where I may rest——"

In the morning Dante bade the kindly monk farewell.

"Where are you going, Messer Alighieri?"

Dante shook his head. "I do not know."

"If only you would stay, and join us as a lay brother," ventured Fra Ilario. "There is so much we might discuss."

Dante shook his head again. "It is impossible. It isn't time yet for me to be at peace." He stared wistfully at the quiet walls. "No," he said, "I must continue, a homeless wanderer."

"But if you proceed north, you reach the mountains. It is almost winter and they say the storms are fierce, and many travellers perish."

"To the north lies my only safety."

"But when you come to the Alps, what then?"

"I'll cross them."

"And then? They say that France is a country of barbarians who speak through their noses."

"Barbarians?" Dante stared. "At Paris, Fra Ilario, are assembled the greatest and most learned doctors in the world. Where do you think our own Thomas of Aquino went to study and to teach? And Albert of

Cologne, who has been justly called the Great? Or the saintly Bonaventura of the Franciscans? Or the learned Siger of Brabant?"

"I am but a simple monk," apologized Fra Ilario. "It had not struck me——"

A light shone on Dante. "It is a sign," he said in wonder. "I shall go to Paris and study theology. In that divine Science it may be I shall discover that path for which you wished me to search, and Beatrice spoke of in my vision."

"Beatrice?"

"Farewell, Fra Ilario! You have helped me more than you can know."

He shouldered his pack, picked up his staff, and set off on the road to Paris.

CHAPTER XIX

*His light eternal
Who used, debating in the Street of Straw,
To syllogize invidious verities.*

Paradiso

DANTE reached Paris in early spring. He was gaunt and wasted, and his pilgrim's garb was shabby and caked with many muds.

It had been a fearful journey. Many a time he thought to have perished on the road. The Alps lifted like a tremendous rampart up to heaven. The wintry blasts sought to tear him from the icy steeps and hurl him into the awful gulfs below. The wind froze him, the rains drenched him, and the snow pelted until he could scarcely breathe.

At times he lay, shivering and shaking in a cave, waiting for a storm to cease. At times he had no bread for days to stay his stomach. Once the timely passage of a robber crew saved him from utter death. The brigands searched his pouch and found only books and papers. So smitten were they with the jest that they didn't slay him, as was their wont; instead, they gave him meat and bread and showed him a secret path that led safely to the other side.

Whenever he came to a monastery, he stayed the night and blessed all monks for Fra Ilario. When monasteries failed, he begged his food and a heap of straw for the night. As a pilgrim he was entitled to beg; as a wandering scholar he was privileged.

At length he came to Paris. There were six denarii in his purse, but joy filled his heart. He had slain the leopard of lust. He had vanquished the she-wolf of greed. Only the lion of pride still stood in the way, and he was already wrestling with the fearful beast.

He was beginning to understand the words of Beatrice. Had he not just passed through the agonies of the damned? Not the Alps. He knew it was not mere physical agony that she meant. But in a moral and a spiritual sense. He had wallowed and been fouled with mire. He had suffered exile and the hatred of his people. He had sought the things of this world and they had been snatched from him. He had wandered on the road to Hell. Now, he hoped, he would ascend the path of penitence.

"Beatrice, protectress and blessed angel!" he prayed. "Will you await me on the Mount?"

Then he entered Paris.

He found Paris much larger than Florence. It had more people

than Bologna or Padua. Its streets were as narrow and dirty as those of Rome, and the same crowds poured through the mud and filth. But at least there were no piles of antique ruins to bar the path and be the haunt of slinking wolves.

He stopped a passer-by and inquired the way to the Rue du Fouarre—the famous Street of Straw—where the Schools fougathered. He spoke in the universal Latin tongue.

The man stared, shrugged, and hurried on.

"Now what manner of barbarians are these French?" he said angrily, falling into the same error as Fra Ilario.

He tried the next in the language of *oc*—the Provençal tongue. But this man, too, shrugged and went his way.

In despair Dante wandered on. He didn't know the Parisian patois of *oïl*.

He passed a great cathedral, and he brightened. There would be priests within and they would direct him. The priest had just finished a mass for departed souls and listened courteously. "The Schools," he said, "are on the left bank of the Seine." He smiled. "They will be easy to find. Just listen for the sound of a great tumult and insurrection, and follow it. Our scholars are nimble with their daggers as well as with their minds."

"In Bologna, where I studied many years ago, there were few daggers."

"Ah, but this is Paris, and Paris is the eldest daughter of the king and the most notable jewel in the diadem of the Church." He spoke with pride. "I have my *licentia ubique docendi* from Paris," he added.

"Obviously." The sarcasm was lost on this priest who harked back to the days of his turbulent youth. "But I came to study Theology, not to employ the dagger."

"Theology?" The priest frowned. "That is chiefly in the hands of the Dominicans."

"It is well. Wasn't Thomas a Dominican?"

The frown deepened. "We of the University don't care much for the interloping Dominicans or for their alleged Doctor from Aquino. In fact, we've held his writings to be full of heretical opinions."

This was the first Dante had heard of the furious struggle for supremacy between the University and the Dominicans. "Nevertheless," he decided, "I shall study Theology."

"As you will."

He looked around the great cathedral. "What place is this?" he asked.

"Notre Dame de Paris."

Dante studied Theology under the Dominicans. He also studied Philosophy in the Schools of the Arts. Thereby he had a foot in either

camp. He was amazed at the rancour between them. The Dominicans upheld their greatest Master, Thomas, while the Schools were a hot-bed of Averroism. There were many followers of Siger of Brabant, against whom Thomas had fulminated as a total heretic.

Dante saw no reason for such narrow partisanship. His intellect welcomed all schools and all knowledge, so long as they didn't offend his rigorous logic and the express dictates of faith. He assimilated with a greedy mind the most diverse elements. The calm, magisterial reasoning of Thomas and Albert, the passionate eloquence of St. Augustine, the subtleties of Siger, bordering—as he was compelled to admit—on the very edge of heresy, the rational mysticism of Bonaventura, and the strange, emotional mysticism of Joachim of Flora. He delighted in them all, and stored away many a precious doctrine to set within a mosaic all his own.

From Theology he gained a sense of order and structure, and saw how God was the necessary apex of a universe of rational parts. The first glow of unassimilated learning which he had spread with such naïve delight in the *Convivio* was gone. In its place grew something deeper, more fundamental. He saw now that he would never finish the *Convivio*. He had a higher, holier task in hand.

He loved especially the disputations and the restless intellectual battles of the Schools. He threw himself into them with ardour. He was older than most of the other scholars—though there were grey-haired men among them—and he had seen and experienced much. His keen-bladed mind and retentive memory became the marvel of the Schools. In one disputation in Theology he took without hesitation fourteen different questions propounded by fourteen different opponents, placed them in their proper order, summarized the arguments of his opponents, and refuted each one with such skill and eloquence that the school and all the crowded auditors burst into spontaneous applause.

But the applause meant little to him. The one place where he yearned with an incessant yearning for applause was Florence, and Florence seemed for ever barred to him. He dreamed of the laurel crown being placed on his head at the font of San Giovanni, where he had been baptized as a little child. He hated Florence for what she had done to him, and loved her as his native city. He would break out into violent tirades against the Florentines as an upstart people, swollen with pride from too sudden gains; and then his face would wet with tears in the humble hope that he might some day be permitted to return. He spoke with biting scorn of Florence as a place where everyone was eager for public office and where laws, manners, customs changed overnight; then he cried out aloud, "Oh, my people, what have I done

unto you?" Florence held now a bastard race, he said, in which the pure blood of the Romans was basely commingled with the barbarous stench of the rude mountain folk who had poured down from the hills of Fiesole. All the more reason, he replied to himself, for the pure of Florence to stand firm and rid themselves of the mixture.

Hate and love tugged him either way; but always love triumphed. Amid his fiercest tirades he would pause, and the strange look of the exile who for ever seeks his home again came into his eyes. *My people, what have I done unto you?*

To earn his bread and pay his fees Dante became a copyist of texts for the booksellers who crowded around the Petit Pont. His services were much in demand, since he was a fair copyist and his script was precise and legible. He would labour until midnight on the interminable parchment; then read and study until dawn, when he arose and went to the Schools. He sat cross-legged on the straw and harkened to the lectures of the masters and the doctors. He took no notes, as did the others; whatever he heard was fast retained. In the winter he froze in the bare, unheated rooms; in the summer he sweltered.

He joined the German Nation of the University, though its members were chiefly English, with a sprinkling of Italians, Scots, Poles, and Danes. He joined because, without the protection of a Nation, a scholar or a master was an alien, with all hands turned against him. But he didn't partake in their revels and bouts of dice and drinking in the taverns. He had had enough of that during the shameful period with Forese and Cecco; and besides, he had no money.

Nor did he join the constant tumults that rose like froth about the Schools and caused the entrances to Straw Street to be barred and chained each night. The scholars fought with the burghers of the town; they battled with the King's Provost and his guard; they chased the Papal Legate for his life and burned his house amid dancing and rejoicings; they fought among themselves, Nation against Nation, when other prey was missing. They defied King and Pope in defence of their fierce-held privileges; and they went on strike and threatened emigration to distant lands when they thought those privileges were invaded. Always the cry arose in the swarming street and the surrounding quarter, "Scholars of the University, to arms!" and instantly the Schools were emptied, knives and swords flashed suddenly from under the long *cappas* that so providentially hid them, and off they rushed against the enemy—Provost Guard, soldiers of the king, or mere exasperated citizens of Paris. Even the masters and their assistant bachelors threw down their lecture notes and joined the tumult.

In all this bustle of intellect and seething life Dante never once forgot why he had come to Paris. He had come to study and equip

himself for what he knew would be his supreme effort. The seed that Fra Ilario had planted and the riddling words of Beatrice guided him and held him to the path.

He had sinned much and strayed more. He had been entangled in the dark wood of life; he had been perilously close to eternal damnation. Only through the intercession of Beatrice had he managed finally to set his feet upon the rugged slope that led slowly and painfully towards God.

But the world around him was still entangled. Wherever he looked, the race of man still stumbled in the wood. The three great beasts roamed unchecked and triumphant. Ambition, greed, and lust ruled the race of man.

The Church, which should have slain these beasts by virtue of the great sword of Peter, had failed in its mission. For Boniface, in his own ambition and swayed by greed, had usurped Peter's place on earth. Through him Rome, the City of God, was transformed into a sewer running with blood and filth. The Church of Christ became a mine exploited for the sake of gold. The wretched followers of Simon Magus held the papal power and prostituted the things of God for gold and silver in adultery. "How great a treasure," thought Dante with indignation, "did our Lord require of Peter before he committed the keys to his care? All he asked was, 'Follow me!'—no more."

And now that Church, in the venal hands of Clement V, had been carried off to Avignon in Babylonian captivity.

But the Empire, successor of Caesar as the Church was of Peter, had likewise failed. The Hapsburgs sat in their barren German possessions and forgot their high mission. They looked at bleeding Italy, true and only seat of Empire, and turned aside. Wretched Italy, with the Papal Seat empty in the sight of God, and the Emperor absent! Slavish Italy, a ship without a steersman in the stress of storm! Nowhere was there peace. The cities fought each other, and the people encompassed within a single wall were worse to one another than wolves. The papal priest, forgetting his true realm, sat in the saddle of Caesar and spurred Italy to destruction. Only with the coming of the Emperor, with the return of the Church to its proper spiritual function, could peace come to the torn and bleeding land.

Peace! It was a great word, a powerful word! More and more Dante yearned for peace. The peace that must come to man with the knowledge of God and His judgment; the peace that could come to earth with a universal Empire, embracing all Christian folk, justly ruled, in which there would be neither Guelf nor Ghibelline, neither oppressor nor oppressed. He ached with the vision.

He was the instrument, he was convinced, through which God intended to bring peace and salvation unto men, to lead them anew upon the path direct.

"Aid me, Beatrice, in this mighty task!" he implored.

For Beatrice was Divine Wisdom since her translation into Heaven. In youth he had loved her with a romantic passion; now he loved her with a deeper, holier love. She was never absent from his thoughts. He carried her image into exile and wanderings, and cherished that image as his personal mediator with God. She was a strange mixture of woman and angel, of supernal wisdom and flesh and blood. She had grown in his visions from the child of nine, the maiden of eighteen, and the married object of his devotion to a spirit purged of earthly dross, a divinity whose care was his salvation.

He saw no incongruity in this development. For all things loved and turned to the object of their love as the plant turns its face to the sun. God Himself was Love and all things moved in cadence to His behest. The love of Beatrice was a stepping stone to the final love of God.

He believed also in his visions. They were as much the truth to him as the sky around and the buildings in the street. They were a shortened passage to the eternal, by which his soul leaped the bounds of flesh. They had been with him since childhood, and they would be with him always. When he had beheld Ser Brunetto in Hell, he was certain of his fate. When Boniface waved fiery feet in air, that was his actual position. When Beatrice appeared and spoke to him, it was Beatrice and no other who had quit the society of Heaven to reprove him and to guide. He was as certain of this as of anything in the world. More certain, for the world might mislead and betray; his visions, never.

Since, then, his mission was clear—to lead his erring fellow men on the true path—how was he to accomplish this? But hadn't Beatrice pointed the way, and the monk, Fra Ilario, in his simple goodness, resolved the riddling? He must exhort by his own example. He had strayed into Hell. He was even now mounting the terraces of Purgatory. In the future his cleansed and penitent soul would speed to Heaven. By that same visible path he would lead all mortals into grace.

Yes, he would take them down into the gates of Hell, so that they might recoil from what awaited them if they persisted. He would name names, and specify the persons they had known in life and the exact agonies they were suffering.

When he had sufficiently lacerated their sinful souls, he would lead them to the terraced Mount of Purgatory, where they might pass through the joyful pangs of the penitent.

Washed now and whole, both they and he would finally ascend to the Heavenly Paradise, where the souls of the elect, the saints and martyrs, the just and apostles, abode in eternal peace and love, joyous in the presence of the Trinity and the overpowering face of God.

This work of his would be on two levels. It would have a literal

meaning—the actual state of souls after death. It would have an allegorical meaning—how man, by his good or ill deserts and in the free exercise of his choice, becomes liable to a justice which punishes or rewards.

He would call this work the *Comedy* of Dante Alighieri; since it was a personal drama which began in harshness and ended prosperously. It would be in the form of a poem or epic, and he intended to devise a new rhyme for its handling, rich and subtle and complicated, as befitted its great subject. He would write it in Italian and not in Latin. For he had a practical, not a speculative purpose in the writing; and he wished it to be read and comprehended by the multitude as well as by the learned.

It would be a supreme epic, such as no mortal man had yet undertaken. He would speak most plainly, but he would speak truly. There would be many to whom his speech would seem harsh and touched with gall. They would decry his judgments on those who had departed, and threaten him with the vengeance of the living. But he would make his vision manifest without fear or timidity; and let those who itched from it scratch as hard as they wanted.

When he reached this phase in his meditations, he prayed again to Beatrice, and it seemed that she came to him in glory and smiled approval on his plans.

Strengthened and heartened, he arose. Since Beatrice had always been his guide, she would be his guide through the realms eternal. Thereby he would make good that vow which he had uttered after her earthly death.

I shall yet write concerning her what hath not before been written of any woman.

Then a thought struck him. It would not be fitting for Beatrice, who was in Heaven, to descend with him into Hell. For that dreadful journey he would require another guide. This problem troubled him for days. Since it could not be a blessed spirit, yet might not with propriety be one of the damned, he must choose for the task one who was neither blessed nor damned. Such a one was Virgil, his master in the poetic art, who had led his own Aeneas past the gates of Hell and prophesied the coming of the Saviour. For his sake, and for the sake of other virtuous pagans like him—Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Homer, Lucan, Horace—he would create a special circle—within Hell, yet not of it. Here they would dwell, stately and sad, their only torment to live in desire, without hope.

The stream of inspiration flowed and sparkled. Though it was almost dawn when this solution came to him, he sat down and began to write:

*In the midway of this our mortal life,
I found me in a gloomy wood, astray,
Gone from the path direct: and e'en to tell,
It were no easy task, how savage wild
That forest, how robust and rough its growth,
Which to remember only, my dismay
Renews, in bitterness not far from death.
Yet to discourse of what there good befell,
All else will I relate discovered there.*

It was a good beginning. The lines leaped and sang from his pen. He wrote of the three beasts he encountered there, and of the appearance of Virgil, whom Beatrice sent to rescue him and bring him, for his own salvation, down into the great pit of Hell.

It was with a feeling of awe that he wrote down the tremendous inscription which he found upon those terrible portals. They were not the product of his imagination. He had seen them with his own eyes; he merely copied them. The sooty characters, dim and smudged with time, made him shudder.

*Through me you pass into the city of woe:
Through me you pass into eternal pain:
Through me among the people lost for aye.
Justice the founder of my fabric moved:
To rear me was the task of power divine,
Supremest wisdom, and primeval love.
Before me things create were none, save things
Eternal, and eternal I endure.
All hope abandon, ye who enter here.*

For two years Dante remained in Paris, studying in the Schools and writing his *Comedy*. He was often in want, since he had but little time now for tedious copying to earn a few sous, and there were days when he had neither a crust of bread nor a candle to shed the darkness from his poem. He had read the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard for a Master of Arts, and the Bible and commentaries for a Doctor in Theology. He had made his replies to the questions of the examiners, and they were satisfied. But he didn't have the fees required for the *inceptio* or the *conventus*; and fees and expensive jollifications were essential parts of these degrees. Whereupon he stopped his studies and despairingly considered what there was next for him to do.

Then, like a bolt from Heaven, came the news that Henry VII, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, had determined to enter upon his rightful heritage and was on his way to Italy.

CHAPTER XX

O human race! what tempests must needs toss thee, what treasure be thrown into the sea, what shipwrecks must be endured, so long as thou, like a beast of many heads, strivest after diverse ends!

De Monarchia

THE news threw Dante into a fever of excitement. It was a miracle from Heaven, the abounding answer to his hopes and prayers. The Emperor was coming—the Emperor divinely chosen to restore the Roman peace and kingdom.

"Behold the peace-bringing Titan!" he exulted. "Let all who hunger and thirst be satisfied in the light of his rays, and they who love iniquity be confounded before his shining face."

"O Italy!" he cried, "henceforth rejoice, who art even now pitied by the very Saracens! Soon thou shalt be envied throughout the world, for thy bridegroom, the most clement Henry, cometh to dry thy tears."

"Praise to this Henry, the new elected and anointed, who is now come into his chosen heritage! Praise even to Clement, the true vicar of Christ, who has joined in welcoming his temporal companion!"

Thus Dante exulted and cried aloud, forgetting his former scorn for this same Clement; indeed, not knowing that Clement, restless at Avignon under the harsh dominion of Philip of France, had sought in Henry a counterweight.

Writing at a furious pace Dante composed a letter addressed to all the kings, dukes, marquises, counts, and peoples of Italy, and signed it "the humble Italian, Dante Alighieri, the Florentine, and undeservedly an exile."

"Behold," he began, "now is the acceptable time, wherein arise the signs of consolation and peace. For a new day beginneth to glow, showing forth the dawn which is even now dissipating the darkness of our long calamity."

It was an impassioned plea to the distracted, convulsed states to accept their Emperor and join once more in a union just and indivisible. "We, too," he added with pathos, "shall see the looked-for joy, we who have kept vigil through the long night in the desert." With the coming of the Emperor, for whose sake Dante had endured such long and weary exile, his term was ended and his own return to the Florence which had basely cast him out assured.

His great *Comedy* was forgotten. The leaves of the *Inferno*, whose cantos had approached completion, were hastily thrust away. There was sterner, more immediate work at hand.

He rushed copies of his letter to all Italy. But he realized the letter was not enough. It was an exhortation, a pamphlet, suited to the immediacies of the occasion. It did not strike at the deeper roots of the problem. It compelled men's emotions, not their reason. It was necessary, he considered, to write a book—calm, temperate, dispassionate, discussing the theoretic basis for this universal monarchy of which he dreamed. It would prove by logic and by historic example that only under a single, universal prince could peace ever come to a world of conflict. As long as there were separate princes, and separate states, each actuated by ambition and cupidity, so long must there be wars and inhumanity of man to man.

There were those who claimed a single prince must prove a tyrant. It was not so, he argued. Since all was his, there was nothing for him to desire. Justice and a reign of law would be his only aim.

But who, he inquired, could be this universal monarch? Who else if not he who stemmed direct from the ancient Roman Empire? That Empire, he had once thought, came about by force of arms alone. He was wiser now—Divine Providence had effected that great dominion.

There was a final problem. Did the authority of the Empire derive from God directly, or from the Roman Pope, as Boniface had insisted and as Clement, Dante feared, now maintained by virtue of his invitation? The former premise, he declared, was the only true one. Both Church and Empire had been given to man by God, in accordance with a twofold end. The Supreme Pontiff guided the human race to life eternal by means of revelation, and the Supreme Emperor led it to temporal felicity through the tranquillity of peace.

He concluded on a note of wise conciliation. "Let Caesar honour Peter as a first-born son should honour his father, so that, refulgent with the light of paternal grace, he may illumine with greater radiance the earthly sphere over which he had been set by Him who alone is Ruler of all things spiritual and temporal."

When he had finished his *De Monarchia*, it was time to hasten to Italy. He packed his books and papers once again, bade farewell to Paris, and set off on foot in pilgrim's garb and with a pilgrim staff.

Henry VII was in Milan, awaiting the formal iron crown of the Lombards in symbol of dominion over Italy. His march had been peaceful and triumphant. Both parties—Guelfs and Ghibellines, weary

of long struggle and bloodshed—acclaimed his coming. It seemed in truth that a new age was dawning.

Only a single city refused to bow the knee in submission. Florence, Black and stubborn, rejected Henry's overtures and commenced hastily to build a third and stronger circle of walls to repel his entrance.

"Arrogant and factious to the last," thought Dante indignantly. "But your time is come, most impious city. The Emperor will compel you to your knees to ask forgiveness."

He hastened his steps towards Milan. He arrived early in January, in the year 1311. The city swarmed with German troops, the court followers of Henry, joyful Ghibellines who saw the end of exile, and ambassadors from all of Italy hastening to make their submission.

Dante went at once to the quarters of the Emperor, his book, *De Monarchia*, under his arm. Here all was turmoil and preparation for the coming crowning. Sentinels rebuffed him. Dante persisted. In some perplexity they passed him to the Chamberlain.

"His Majesty, the Emperor, is too busy to see you," the Chamberlain said peevishly.

"But I am Dante Alighieri of Florence, who has long waited for this moment."

"I don't care who you are. The Emperor is being crowned to-morrow and he has no time for any Florentines."

Dante's stooped shoulders straightened. His eyes flashed. "I am Dante Alighieri," he repeated proudly, "and I've had dealings before with the graceless tribe of chamberlains. I'll take a refusal only from the Emperor himself, not from an underling. Go, therefore, and tell him that I have a book for his perusal. It is a book that will do more to keep the crown fixed firmly on his head than all this show, or babbling words of yours."

The Chamberlain hesitated. This fellow was a writer, then; and His Majesty had a fondness for writers. "Stay if you wish," he grumbled, "while I seek out the Emperor. But don't blame me if I return to kick you from the door for your impudence."

He returned in half an hour. "The Emperor," he said unwillingly, "will grant you five minutes. Not a second more."

"It is all I wish."

He led Dante through the palace that Henry had taken for his headquarters. He opened a door into a room where three men stood in conversation.

"Here is this Alighieri," he announced, "to whom Your Majesty was gracious enough to yield an audience." He bowed and retired, muttering as he went.

Dante bowed deeply and looked with eagerness at the men. Two

were captains by their dress. But the third was the Emperor. Dante saw a man in middle age, of a thickset, vigorous frame, blond of hair and high-coloured of face. One eye had a squint to it, but the effect was not unpleasant.

Henry turned from his captains with a smile. "You are a forthright man, Messer Alighieri," he observed, speaking in French. "No one else has managed to get past my Chamberlain."

"I was bold because it was necessary, Your Majesty. I've waited too long for your coming to be turned away by anyone but yourself."

Henry surveyed him with interest. "I've heard something of your boldness," he said. "There were few men who stood up to Boniface the way you did. I understand you have a book for me?"

Dante took it from beneath his arm and extended it almost tenderly. "It is a thesis, Your Majesty. It sets a firm foundation for a Roman Empire ordained to govern the world in temporal affairs as the Pope is ordained to govern in things spiritual."

One of the captains said sourly: "It will take more than a book to make good that claim. I'm afraid Your Majesty will have to depend on the sword a while longer."

"You never were one for the written word," said Henry. "Yet there is truth in what you say. However, Messer Alighieri, I shall be pleased to read what you have written."

"They that heed not the word and take to the sword," said Dante, "shall perish by the sword."

Henry smiled. "That might apply to your own Florentines. Why have they failed, alone of all the cities, to accept my ambassadors?"

"Because they are a stiff-necked crew, swollen with moneys, and governed by vile men. If you would hold Italy in peace, it is necessary immediately to reduce this town to your will."

"We're not worrying about Florence," spoke the other captain. "We have bigger game in mind."

"You are wrong, Messer Captain. If Florence is let alone, she will scatter the seeds of rebellion and sow a tumult in your rear. I know my city well."

"Everyone deems his own little town the most important in the world," said the captain carelessly.

"Well, we shall see about these things," Henry interposed. "I shall glance at your book at the first opportunity, Messer Alighieri."

Dante construed this as dismissal. He advanced respectfully, went to his knees, and kissed the emperor's foot as was the custom. But his first delight was already clouded.

The ceremony of the crowning was a noble spectacle. All Italy

seemed to have gathered in Milan. The great square was black with people, and the surrounding roofs were so weighted that it appeared they must sag and plunge to earth. The heavy circle, crude and simple in its iron, was placed upon the blond head of Henry. It had crowned the Lombard conquerors; it had graced the massive head of Charlemagne; and now it rested on this latest Emperor of the Romans.

The spectators acclaimed the portent with loud cries and Dante, shouting as wildly as the rest, lost the doubt that plagued him. He had beheld the coming of a new era. He had seen with his own eyes the universal Lord. He was in Italy, centre of the world, blessed garden of the Empire—that Italy, which Dante loved the more because he lashed it with rods of iron and scorpion whips for its degeneracy and madness. Now it would bloom again, and justice would prevail.

The peace for which Dante had prayed lasted a few weeks. Then that took place which he had feared when Henry delayed on stern measures against Florence. Encouraged by the Florentine defiance Cremona revolted against the new-crowned Emperor. Yielding to the pressure of the French, Clement reversed his stand and permitted King Robert of Naples, French in blood and in connections, to occupy Rome.

Henry marched against Cremona and took the town by storm. Then Brescia rebelled. He moved against Brescia and reduced it. Florence hastened its walls to prepare for the expected attack.

Dante burned with grief and wrath. What, must Florence for ever play the troublemaker? Must the city of his birth wait until the just indignation of the Emperor levelled it to the ground?

In a consuming frenzy he penned a letter: "Dante Alighieri, a Florentine and undeservedly an exile, to the most infamous Florentines within."

It was a furious, terrible letter. He poured into it all the hope deferred, all the bitter rage of one who sees a world doomed for failure to heed the patent truth.

"You," he thundered, "who transgress every law of God and man, whom a dire rapaciousness urges headlong into every crime—does not the dread of a second death pursue you? For you first and you alone, refusing the yoke of liberty, have set yourselves against the glory of the Roman Emperor, king of the world and minister of God. The hope you vainly cherish in your madness will not be furthered by this rebellion of yours, but by your resistance the just wrath of the king at his coming will be only the more inflamed against you."

"If my prophetic spirit be not deceived," he cried, and felt himself in truth a prophet, "your city, worn out with long sufferings, shall be

delivered at the last into the hands of the stranger, and the few that shall be left to endure exile shall witness her downfall with tears and lamentation."

He was exhausted in flesh and in spirit when he finished this fearful indictment. If only he could reach this recalcitrant city, if only it would harken to his cries before Henry moved! For Henry was going to move, as move he must.

Instead, Henry went into comfortable winter quarters, and made no further move. Dante hastened to him in amazement.

"Let all else go," he urged. "I beseech Your Majesty, recall your captains from Cremona and Brescia; concentrate all your forces on Florence, the viper and the plague. She is the sick sheep that infects your flock with her contagion. Banish delay and strike while there is time. For at Florence is the hydra-head of all rebellion. Until you crush that head, all other sieges are mere loppings, and a dozen other heads will grow to take their place."

Henry was annoyed. He was getting tired of this strange man who seemed filled with such venom against his native city and whose boldness in his presence was unparalleled. He had glanced through the first few leaves of his book and set it aside. It was full of tedious arguments and pedantic analogies. His captains had been right.

"We shall handle these matters in our own way and our own good time, Messer Alighieri," he said flatly, and terminated the audience.

Dante went away crushed with despair. "The blindness of mortals!" he groaned. "His eyes are dazzled by the vision of Rome. He will march south and leave behind him rebellion and tumult that will cost him dear. Almighty God!" he cried, "am I always to be sick at heart and see in turn each dream of justice perish?"

Since his hopes had failed him and he had been dismissed with such scant courtesy, there was no reason for remaining in Henry's train. He was down to his last coin again. He had scraped and borrowed what he could, hoping for return to Florence, hoping that Henry might deem his book worthy of reward. Now it was ended.

Defeated, embittered, he took up his wanderings again. Staff in hand he went from court to court, from count to count. Everywhere he sought refuge, and found the refuge so graceless that, with bitterness renewed, he resumed his endless wandering.

The unfinished *Inferno* lay heavy in his pouch. He had no heart to take it out, to resume this journey through the circles of Hell. Was he not himself journeying through an earthly Hell?

Florence, fearful of immediate assault, sought to recall to her defence those whom she had exiled. But the proclamation excepted from its terms a specific few. Among them was Dante Alighieri. He had

placed himself beyond the pale by that last terrible assault on his compatriots.

Dante read the proclamation and knew now that his cup of woe was spilling over. The Emperor had failed him and Florence rejected him. He folded the proclamation carefully, placed it in his pouch, and picked up his staff. Its point was worn from much abuse, and he leaned his weight upon it more heavily than ever.

The Proclamation roused Henry somewhat from his lethargy. He issued his own edict, placing Florence outside the pale of Empire and declaring its citizens to be outlaws. Aside from that he did nothing.

Rome still beckoned, blinding him to trouble in the north. With the coming of spring Henry led his troops against the Eternal City. The forces of King Robert yielded the lower town and retired to the quarter of St. Peter and the Vatican. With the utmost pomp and ceremony Henry permitted himself to be crowned anew at the hands of three cardinals who proved complacent.

But now he could no longer disregard Florence. That busy city in the north had encouraged new rebellions and actually dared send contingents to the aid of Robert.

Henry hurried back and in the autumn laid siege to the long-defiant town. Dante visited his camp.

The Emperor was in a better mood on this occasion.

"Well, Messer Alighieri," he greeted, "you are having your wish. I am scotching your hydra in its lair."

"It's too late, Your Majesty," said Dante heavily.

"What do you mean—too late?"

"The young of the hydra have already spawned. They swarm in every nook and cranny of Italy. And Florence has had time to strengthen its walls."

"Nonsense! Our siege engines will breach their walls in a hurry." He stared curiously at Dante. "Do you wish to join my forces in the assault? This is your chance for vengeance against the city you hate."

A look of infinite sadness showed in Dante's face. "I do not hate my city," he said in a low voice, "nor do I wish to be a party to her destruction."

The Emperor was astounded. "But you were the one who kept urging me to assault Florence," he exclaimed half-angrily.

"So I did, Your Majesty; and I still do." Dante's lips twitched and his eyes betrayed his anguish. "Don't you understand, Your Majesty?" he burst forth. "Florence must be humbled or there'll be no peace in Italy. Your Empire will be based on sand foundations until this centre of resistance is wholly broken. So I say to you: *Assault!* But does that

mean my heart doesn't bleed? Does it mean my roots won't be torn when my city, the place where I was born and baptized, the home of my ancestors and my children, whose every stone and market-place is known to me as are the fingers of my own hand, is shattered and destroyed? I am a man, Your Majesty, as well as a dreamer of dreams."

Henry shook his head. This was beyond him. He could understand a desire for vengeance against a city that had cast him off. He could understand a furious kind of local patriotism. But this strange desire for a mythical universal justice at the expense of one's personal feelings was too much for him. He knew what *he* wanted. An extension of his rule to take in all the territories the Empire had once claimed. Italy was rich and fertile and would be an ornament to his dominion. But this man was pushing him forward, urging him along paths of which he had only the dimmest comprehension. What did he mean by his prate of universal justice? Justice was very well, as long as he, the Emperor, didn't suffer by it. He began to feel uncomfortable in the presence of this burning, prophetic madman. He didn't wish to be used for purposes he didn't understand.

"There are other Florentine exiles in my camp who aren't as nice as you in distinctions, Messer Alighieri," he said with an attempt at sarcasm. But sarcasm seemed futile against this man. "Do as you will," he ended abruptly.

Dante quit camp and went to Poppi. His soul, in truth, was torn. He prayed daily for guidance. There were times when he hoped Florence would resist successfully; there were others when he called for its destruction as a menace to that great Empire under whose sway the suffering world might grow whole again. Henry was no Caesar or Augustus. Yet it didn't matter. As God's instrument, regardless of personal merit, he must perform the task allotted to him. "He must, dear God! He must! Let Your kingdom come on earth as it is in Heaven!"

But Henry proved a broken instrument. He lay inactive in quarters at the monastery of San Salvi, while his troops wasted away from disease and lack of supplies. Florence sat snug behind its walls and defied him.

At length the Emperor himself took with a fever. He raised the siege and went to Pisa to recuperate.

The next summer, instead of returning to besiege Florence, he turned his levies to the south and Naples. Emboldened by Florence's successful defiance, Pope Clement emerged from his state of cloudy neutrality and ranged himself openly against the Emperor. The fever recurred near Siena. For a few days Henry was delirious. At

Buonconvento he died. The discouraged troops returned to Pisa and buried him with due solemnity.

With him died the dreams of Dante. The Empire, to which he had devoted the flaming passion of his soul, was ended. The Church lay deeper in captivity in France. He himself was now irrevocably torn from Florence. The world was once more a place of evil and desolation. Once more Dante was a homeless wanderer, without a place to call his own.

He took with a chill and lay for weeks between life and death, cared for by an innkeeper's wife who bemoaned the fact that her enforced guest had not a single coin in his purse to pay for lodging.

In his delirium he called incessantly on Beatrice. But Beatrice denied her presence. All, all had forsaken him. It seemed to him in the madness of his fever that God, too, had forsaken him.

Then, one night, when the inn folk were certain he was dying, Beatrice came and laid soft hands upon his brow.

"You have suffered much, my Dante," she said with indescribable pity. "But the way to Heaven may be gained only by suffering and repentance. Arise and henceforth devote yourself to your proper task. Write your 'Comedy', which you abandoned for the vain mirages of the world. There lies your true vocation. Through its pages you will disclose the path to salvation. Through its pages you will live and be remembered. Let the kingdom of this earth be. God, in His wisdom, from eternity has decreed when it will come to pass. Not all your vain striving can hasten its date by an instant."

The next morning the fever broke. The woman of the inn, come to lay out the corpse and lament her losses, found Dante sitting up, weak and dreadfully thin, but recovered.

That afternoon a letter came by messenger. It was sealed with the coat of arms of the Scaligers.

"To our most esteemed Messer Dante Alighieri," it ran. "Do you remember when I was a little boy of nine and you spoke gravely to me as an equal of matters of life and fortune and coming death? Do you remember also my promise that when I became lord of Cernaia I would call you back and make you my court poet and wisest counsellor? I am now in truth the lord of Verona. Therefore do you, my most revered poet and counsellor, drop all else you may have in hand and hasten forthwith to Verona where you shall be welcomed as befits your deserts and where you will gladden the heart of Can Grande della Scala."

The tears came to Dante's eyes. He had been in the shadow of death and he was whole again. He had seen Beatrice and he had heard from Can Grande.

He put on his pilgrim's garb and made his feeble way to the kitchen.

The good wife threw up her hands. "Now whither away? You're weak as a suckling infant."

"To Verona," he said joyfully. "Make up my reckoning. I'll send money by messenger from Verona. And—thank you for your care and kindness."

She watched him walk slowly down the road. She never expected any money from Verona. It was a pretext to get away. She knew he had no money with him. When he lay ill, she had personally searched his few belongings. "Oh, well," she sighed, "the good Lord will count at least one good deed for me."

CHAPTER XXI

What! Can I not everywhere gaze upon the sun and the stars? Can I not under any sky meditate on the most precious truths?

Dante's Letter

CAN GRANDE DELLA SCALA greeted Dante with every evidence of affection.

"Welcome, old friend! Thrice welcome! It is fourteen years since we have seen each other."

"Yes, my lord. Fourteen years in which you have grown to splendid manhood and an ornament to all Italy; while I——" He sighed and spread his hands in a hopeless gesture.

The young man was indeed shocked at the appearance of Dante. He remembered him in the prime of life—vigorous, hair and growing beard black as charcoal, spare of limb but hardly stooped, full of hopes and plans for his return to Florence.

Now he beheld an ageing man of nigh on fifty. Illness had wasted him and unbroken exile had depleted his resources. The beard was heavier now, and both beard and hair were crisped with grey. The scholar's stoop had changed into the bending back of age. Hope had fled, and the years of wandering were stamped indelibly upon his brow. Only his eyes retained their earlier brilliance. Even when he sighed and seemed most hopeless, they blazed with fires unearthly.

Meanwhile Dante surveyed in turn the boy of nine who had miraculously become a man. The lineaments were there but the softness of childhood had given place to the firm, magnificent lines of splendid youth. His hair was still blond and curled, and his eyes blue. But there was an easy consciousness of power in his glance and in his bearing. Since the death of Bartolommeo he had ruled Verona well and wisely. In spite of his youth he had become the chief captain of the Ghibellines, and Henry had made him his Imperial Vicar. Almost alone among the Ghibellines his arms had proved victorious, and there were those who hailed him as the chief hope of the cause that had gone to seeming ruin with Henry's death.

He laid his hand warmly on Dante's shoulder. "You have done well and nobly, my friend. You have been a tower of strength to the cause we both hold dear. Your books and letters aroused the hearts of good men everywhere. It wasn't your fault we failed. It was Henry of Luxemburg who failed us. In peaceful times he might have proved a worthy prince. But he didn't know how to act with energy and decision. We'll have much to talk about, you and I."

A little flame stirred in Dante's breast. Here was a man, for all his beardless years. He was lithe and swift like a greyhound, this Can Grande whose birthplace was between Feltro and Montefeltro. He made the pun deliberately. For *Can* meant dog and *Veltro* was a breed of greyhound. Had he been in Henry's stead, who knew but that the Empire might not even now be fact instead of dream, and Italy asmile in peace and unity. Perhaps it wasn't too late. Perhaps from this splendid youth might come the great things of his visions. He was young and well-regarded. He had won brilliant victories. Might he not win more on a larger field?

"Yes, my lord, we have much to talk of, you and I."

"Stand not on such ceremony, my Dante. I wish to continue Can Grande to you. But it is time for you to rest. You look weary. Let me assign you to an apartment."

Much had changed in Verona since Dante had first found it a place of refuge. Bartolommeo had practised a penurious open-handedness. He wished to be known as a patron of arts and letters, but he had no real taste for them and saw no reason for spending good money in their behalf.

Can Grande was different. The lessons he had learned as a child during those walks and talks with Dante Alighieri had borne ripe fruit. He read poetry with enthusiasm and his criticism of painting was just and accurate. Money was something to be distributed with lavish liberality. His court swarmed with poets, painters, historians, courtiers, Ghibelline exiles, preachers, prisoners he had captured in his various campaigns, buffoons, mountebanks, soldiers, dwarfs, and lawyers. All were welcome; all partook of his table and found their dwelling in his palace. In his hospitable precincts could be found Germans, Italians, French, Flemings, English, and a heterogeneous array, disputing in a tremendous babble of tongues on philosophy, theology, and astrology, on music, poetry, and politics.

He took a youth's delight in a fanciful and symbolic arrangement of apartments for his numerous guests. Along a single corridor he placed the men of arms and named it the Hall of Triumph. The poets were segregated in a Grove of Muses. The Hall of Mercury housed the artists, and there was even a Paradise for the visiting clerics.

Dante moved into the Grove of Muses and was assigned a personal attendant. His present quarters were more ample and cheerful than the small space Bartolommeo had seen fit to allot him.

If it were possible for him ever to be content again, he thought, this was the place. But he knew that content would never return, nor happiness. Only in Florence could there be such things. There he was a citizen, a man, independent, beholden to no one. Here, for all the

luxury and gaiety, he was an exile, a humble seeker after favours, dependent on the bounty of another.

Can Grande, as a special token of his regard, seated Dante at his own table. One other shared the table—Guido di Castel of Reggio, exiled from his town as Dante was from his. Dante found Guido a man of simple habits and simpler thoughts. He spoke little, attending wholly to his food, and Dante bore with his presence. He couldn't say as much for the others of the court.

He despised their gossip and withdrew from their quarrels. The exiles were as bad as the courtiers, and the courtiers thought only of place and the antics of the buffoons. One exile in particular attached himself like a leech to Dante. This was a fellow Florentine, a lawyer name Lapo Salterello, a most litigious and loquacious man.

There wasn't a lawyer in Italy who knew as much as he, he modestly asserted. Florence had lost its single jewel when that wretched city threw him out. "Of course I understand, my dear Dante, that you have some fame as a poet. But poetry is a mere diversion, not a serious business. Law, on the other hand, is the noblest of professions. Was it not the law of the Romans that conquered the world? Without law how can a man know what rights he has? Have you, perchance," he asked, "some law suits you wish me to handle? Even some claim you've almost forgotten? I am very good at making old claims come to life."

"Yes, I have a claim, Ser Salterello."

The lawyer rubbed his hands. "Ah, there you see! Every man has. Tell me at once what it is."

"It's a claim to peace and privacy, Ser Salterello. In plain words I wish to be rid of your chatter." Whereupon Dante stalked away.

The rebuffed lawyer took his revenge by spreading tales about this arrogant and contemptuous newcomer. The tales found ready ears. For Dante joined neither their sports nor their talks. He drew himself apart and took the old walks he had taken many years ago. Life was almost over, and he must use his remaining years wisely and well. All else had failed; but God and the eternal remained.

He had erred. He had placed all his pride in intellect, in the power of reasoning. He had sought after earthly happiness and honours. He had thought to storm Heaven with his works, and he had been on the high road to damnation. If Beatrice had not saved him, he would have perished.

But now he saw how vain was intellect without faith, how transitory human hopes without the love of God. Not a single step can the soul take towards holiness without the illumination of grace.

"Oh, you proud Christians!" he cried, "can't you see that you are only worms, created but to form the angelic butterfly? Why soars your

intellect so exalted when you are mere defective insects—grubs in which full being is lacking?" In these words he castigated his former self.

"Human fame," he meditated, "is but a breath of wind, which blows now from here and now from there, and changes name whenever it changes direction."

On another occasion he prayed, "O race of man born to fly upwards, why at a little wind do you fall back to earth again?"

Thus he tried to rid himself of what he knew was still his one great sin—the sin of pride.

He humbled himself whenever he could; but his humbleness was only before God, never before people. He didn't know that in humbling one's self before the creatures of earth, which are God's creation, one humbled one's self truly before God. This was the lesson St. Francis had preached; it was one Dante never took to heart.

Occasionally he heard from those few old friends of his who were still alive. He heard, strangely enough, from Cecco. Cecco's poverty had deepened, and he had sought ribald refuge in a religious house. His name was now Brother Henry. But the hair shirt and the corded gown covered the Cecco of old. It was a means, he wrote, of escaping his creditors and the pangs of hunger. But when his father died, who had plagued him, summer and winter, many a year, and he came into his inheritance, then to the devil with Brother Henry! What a fling he would have then!

Dante wrote back sharply. "You're as foul-mouthed a rascal as ever," he declared, "and deserving of your fate. Isn't it time to forget your days of shame and to live in accordance with the habit you've assumed?"

A set of verses was the quick retort, scurrilous and railing in the old accustomed style:

*Dante Alighieri, if I jest and lie,
You in such lists might run a tilt with me;
I get my dinner, you your supper, free;
And if I bite the fat, you suck the fry;
I shear the cloth and you the teazel ply;
If I've a strut, who's prouder than you are?
If I'm foul-mouthed, you're not particular;
And you've turned Lombard, even if Roman I.
So that, 'fore Heaven! if either of us flings
Much dirt at the other, he must be a fool;
For lack of luck and wit we do these things.
Yet if you want more lessons at my school,
Just say so, and you'll find the next touch stings—
For, Dante, I'm the goad and you're the bull.*

Dante shuddered: "There, but for the grace of God, go I." He didn't reply, and he heard no more from Cecco.

Guido Cavalcanti was dead. So was the smiling Lapo. Forese Donati had died and was now in Purgatory, expiating those ancient sins of gluttony and riot. Cecco was a scoundrel. Immanuel, the Jew, had vanished towards Fermo, submerged in repentance and new-found piety. The glorious band of singers, of gay and careless men, had been broken up for ever. They who had hailed the new day and sung their melodies of love and laughter had descended into darkness and into night. Forese might be saved; but Guido and Lapo never. Cecco was irredeemably damned; and Immanuel, unfortunately, was a Jew.

Only Cino remained. He had been exiled from Pistoia, and led a similar life of wandering. Dante corresponded with him in rhyme, as they had always done. He wrote gloomily:

*Ah! Master Cino, how the time turns base,
And mocks at us, and on our rhymes says 'Fie!'*

But Cino responded with exhortation:

*Beloved, O my brother, sorrow-worn,
Even in that lady's name who is thy goal,
Sing on till thou redeem thy plighted word.*

Dante's eyes dimmed with tears. "Faithful Cino, you remember my vows better than I do. Lady Beatrice, I have forgotten and forgotten. But I'll forget no more. From now until the day I die, I dedicate my days to your work."

He took out the sheets of his abandoned *Inferno*. In a slow, even hand he wrote:

There is a place in Hell called Malebolge.

Dante held to his vow. He shut himself up in his Grove of the Muses and worked from dawn until dusk. He grew lean at his self-appointed task, but he didn't falter. The cantos of the *Inferno* moved steadily and inexorably down the narrowing circles of Hell until they ended at that dreadful point where the arch-traitors hung in agony from the frozen jaws of Satan. Each scene, as he set it down in the intricate rhythms of the terza-rima, was sharp as any engraving. They were no scenes of mere imagination. He, Dante Alighieri, had actually witnessed these things.

It was he who had swooned for pity at the pitiful tale of Paolo and Francesca; it was he who had been afraid before the hellish hosts of

the city of Dis; it was he who had seen Ulysses and Diomedes wrapped in a single flame and heard the story of that last mighty voyage of the ageing hero; it was he who had stamped on the ice-sheathed face of the traitor, Fra Alberic, yet had shed tears when he heard the tale of Count Ugolino and his tender children; it was he who, mired with the grime of Hell, climbed upwards at the end "till on our view the beautiful lights of heaven dawned through a circular opening in the cave; thence issuing, we again beheld the stars."

So bemused was he by the power of his own fantasy that he walked the streets of Verona in a dream. He was seeing again each livid circle; he was speaking once more to the elder Cavalcanti. His lips moved as he walked, and he saw neither to the right nor left.

The people of Verona beheld with awe this slow-paced figure. Rumour fled up and down the town and wove its legend around him. Tales of his work spread and enlarged in the telling. He was a magician who evoked the demons from the underground domain. He was a sorcerer, to meet whose eye was death.

One day he walked slowly down a street, wrapped in thought as was his wont. A group of women sat on the stone steps of a doorway, gossiping in the evening air. Their voices hushed suddenly at the passage of this brown-garbed figure. They stared uneasily.

One nudged another. "Do you see that man?" she whispered.

"I see him, neighbour. He is Alighieri, the magician."

"He is more than magician. They say he goes down into Hell itself and brings back news of those who are below."

"God keep and save us!"

"It is true," spoke another in a trembling voice. "Just see how singed his beard is and how black his colour from the heat and smoke below."

In their fear the voices rose shrill in the quiet street. They pierced Dante's wrapped bemusement. "What ignorant fools and simple are these women!" he thought.

Then, in sudden impulse, he turned and put on his darkest frown. "It is true, you gossips, that I go down into Hell," he spoke sternly. "But are you not all in Hell? Have I not seen you—and you—and you," his finger darted from one to the other, "toasting separately on a demon's pitchfork as though you were a spitted goose? You are in Hell and not here. They are demons who inhabit these itching carcasses of yours and speak scandal of your neighbours."

The women screamed. Their faces blanched and their cheeks shook like jelly. They gazed fearfully at each other as if in truth that other were a devil who had taken the form of their neighbour. They screamed again and scattered like fowl at the sudden swoop of a hawk. Each

fled to her own doorway and disappeared within, moaning and crying. Dante resumed his walk. But he was a little ashamed of himself.

The next day the Inquisitor of Verona summoned him. He was a Franciscan monk and clothed with all the powers of his dread office. He received Dante in his inquisitorial chamber. There were documents before him.

He began abruptly. "Are you the man who claims to have visited Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise?"

"I am Dante Alighieri of Florence."

The Inquisitor looked up in anger. "You evade the question."

"I speak the truth."

The Inquisitor grew heated. "Beware, Messer Alighieri! I know much about you. You are given to writing canzoni, sonnets, and idle tales to frighten simple women. You would have done much better to write a learned work resting on the foundations of the Church of God, instead of giving your time to such rubbish as may some day serve you as you deserve."

Dante stood before him calmly. "My work is learned, Fra Inquisitor. And it strengthens the Church of God as no work has done since the days of the holy Fathers."

"You speak sacrilege. How dare you compare your heretical nonsense to the divine writings of St. Augustine, St. Jerome, and the mighty Tertullian?"

"Have you read in my *Comedy*?"

"Of course I haven't. But I've heard sufficient about it."

"Read it for yourself. I shall send you a copy of what I have finished on the morrow." Then he withdrew.

Two days later the Inquisitor sent for him again. He was a changed man. The rumpled sheets of the *Inferno* lay before him. He stared a trifle fearfully at Dante.

"I sat up the night, reading in your work, Messer Alighieri," he said. "There are certain passages which have a most heretical tinge. The Church knows nothing of your Limbo for those who were lukewarm in their deeds and faith. You speak slightly of the holy wearers of the papal crown, and you are false in your denunciation of indulgences as barter of no value." Then he burst out eagerly: "Did you in very truth see Pope Nicholas in Hell? Were the soles of Boniface indeed tickled with flames as you say?"

"I saw Nicholas, and a place was prepared for Boniface when I was there."

The Inquisitor crossed himself. "It is indeed a fearful and a marvelous judgment," he murmured. "Tell me," he asked almost pleadingly, "were there any Franciscans among the damned?"

"There were a few. But chiefly they are in Paradise. When I come to write my *Paradiso*, you will find Bonaventura in the heaven of the sun and he will discourse upon the Order of Franciscans."

"Ah, that is good!" The brow of the Inquisitor cleared. "Are there more Franciscans in Paradise than Dominicans?" he inquired further.

"It is possible," Dante said cautiously.

The Inquisitor beamed. "You have done a noble work, Messer Alighieri," he said cordially. "While there are certain errors in it as I pointed out, I find it moral and uplifting. It should be read with profit by every true Christian. Tell me, where am I placed?"

Dante concealed a smile. "You haven't died yet and gone to your reward, Fra Inquisitor."

"That is true," observed the Franciscan thoughtfully. He seemed disappointed. "Nevertheless, it is an inspiring work."

"And the accusations against me?"

"Bah! They are the silly outpourings of ignorant folk." He took the documents and tore them across. "I'll not even place them on the record. I'll wait with eagerness for more of your cantos, Messer Alighieri."

They became good friends after this, and many a learned discussion followed on points of theology and the proper place of living men in the respective realms of eternity.

Can Grande was even more enthusiastic. "I have never read anything like it!" he declared. "Your genius shines in every line. I did a good thing for myself when I brought you to my court. Tell me one thing, though," he asked, with a strange timidity. "Who is this greyhound of whom you speak that was born between Feltro and Feltro and will harry the great she-wolf to Hell?"

Dante bowed deeply. "Have I not made it clear? It is you, Can Grande della Scala, lord of Verona and destined to mighty deeds. You are that *Veltro*."

Can Grande looked serious. "You have placed a terrible responsibility on me, my Dante. I hope I shall not betray your prophecy."

"I hope so, too," said Dante.

He had written those weighty lines with that in mind. In this young captain lay his last hopes for Italy. If he could stir his enthusiasm and lead him along the path, who knew?

Otherwise Dante paid but little heed to the clamour and noise of the outside world. He was immersed in a world of his own; it was the world of eternity, from the vantage point of which the earth was mean and small and the threshing-floor of Italy an inconspicuous speck.

Not even when Florence renewed its sentence of exile against him with the further proviso that, if captured, he should be taken to the place of justice and there have his head struck from his shoulders, so that he die outright, was he moved.

He simply said: "That is a better way of death than burning in the fire. Thank you, my Florence."

Then, with the utmost calm, he sat down and commenced his *Purgatorio*:

*O'er better waves to speed her rapid course
The light barque of my genius lifts the sail,
Well pleased to leave so cruel sea behind;
And of that second region will I sing,
In which the human spirit from sinful blot
Is purged, and for ascent to Heaven prepares.*

But later news from Florence jarred him from his calm. His two sons—Pietro and Jacopo—the sons of his loins, had been included in this latest sentence!

"What have they done to merit this condemnation?" he cried. "Or do the magnanimous rulers of Florence hope to strike at me through them?"

Then they must be in exile, too. But where? What had happened to them? During the long years of his wanderings he had often wondered about them and his two daughters. They were grown now to manhood and womanhood. They had come to maturity without a father's guiding hand and care. Their mother? He avoided thought of her. She was a stranger whose features had faded from his mind.

He had never heard from wife or children, and he had thought the embittered wife had turned his children's minds against him. But this condemnation seemed to point otherwise. If they were Donati in spirit, instead of Alighieri, this terrible sentence would not have been invoked against them.

But where were they, and why didn't they communicate with him if they were in exile? He stirred with long-dead feelings of paternity. He wrote secretly and in haste to a certain priest in Florence with whom he was related.

"By that nephew we have in common," he adjured him, "tell me what is happening in Florence. Tell me especially where are my sons, and what they have done to earn the foul decree of that infamous city."

But no answer came to this letter, and no word from his vanished sons. With a heavy heart he turned to his *Purgatorio*. Slowly he

climbed the terraced cantos, groaning with each penitent, and sought the light of that upper Mount towards which he climbed.

Months later a letter came. It was from that priest whom he had begged for news. With trembling hands he opened it. It was short, urgent, and obviously written in haste.

"A decree is about to be issued in Florence," it read. "It is an amnesty. According to its terms you and all exiles may return to Florence, provided you pay a fine and offer public penance in the Baptistery. Let me hear from you at once if you accept."

Dante did no more work that day. He rushed from his chamber like a madman and ran through the streets of Verona in such wild haste that the people stared after him, murmuring: "His familiar spirits have turned on him. Behold how he rushes to escape their torments."

But Dante heard them not. He hurried out of the city walls and sought the cool and quiet of the country paths and woods.

"At last!" he shouted, and the birds flew from the trees in fright at the sound of his voice. "At last I may return to the city of my nativity. At last I am no wandering outlaw, with all hands raised against me!"

The tears streamed down his face and he raised his hands in broken prayers—to the Holy Virgin, to San Giovanni, to Beatrice. It was they who had finally answered his implorings.

The mask of indifference he had placed upon his face these bitter years broke down. His features became mobile and soft. He threw himself upon the grass. "Florence, hated one and lovely city, shall I behold you once again? Shall I gaze upon the house in which I was born? Shall I view the palace of the Portinari where first the Lady Beatrice uncovered her worth to my eyes? Shall I roam the streets and lanes where Guido discoursed on poetry and life? Shall I stand in the market-place and harken to the cries of the butchers and listen to the cracked songs of the jongleurs? Shall I gaze once more upon the baptismal font of San Giovanni where I once——?"

His raptures fell like sails when the mast is chopped. The Baptistery! What had the letter said about the Baptistery?

He tore open the folded page again. His eyes clung to two phrases: *Provided you pay a fine! Provided you offer public penance in the Baptistery!*

In his first excitement his hurrying eyes had missed them. Now he read slowly, tasting them to the full.

The letter dropped from his hand upon the grass. The sky darkened, and the birds ceased their song. Pay a fine? Appear before the altar of San Giovanni in his shirt and with a lighted taper in his hand to make a

spectacle like any condemned criminal? Was this the only way by which he could return to Florence?

It was night when he quit the cold, damp fields and made his way back into Verona. The watch at the gate would have stopped him, since it was past the time for entry. But his gaze was so fixed and his face so terrible that they shrank from him and let him pass.

Without a word to anyone he made his way to his room, fumbled for the candle, and lit it from the fire. He placed it in the sconce above his desk, laid out clean pieces of paper and began to write.

At first he wrote slowly and heavily. The yellow light flickered and cast shadows on the paper. Then his pen began to move more rapidly until it danced and jogged as though possessed.

"Is this, then, the generous recall of Dante Alighieri to his native city, after the miseries of nearly fifteen years of exile?" he demanded vehemently. "Is this the reward of innocence manifest to all the world, of unceasing sweat and toil in study? Far be it from a friend of philosophy, this abject self-abasement, befitting only a soul of clay! What! permit himself to be paraded at the altar as a criminal, after the fashion of Ciolo or other infamous wretch! Far be it from the preacher of justice, when he had suffered a wrong, to pay his coin to them that inflicted it, as though they had deserved well of him!

"No! This is not the way for me to return to my country. If another can be found which does not derogate from the fame and honour of Dante, that will I take with no lagging feet. But if no such path leads back to Florence, then will I never enter Florence more.

"What! can I not everywhere gaze upon the sun and the stars? Can I not under any sky meditate on the most precious truths, without first rendering myself inglorious, nay ignominious, in the eyes of the people and city of Florence? Nay, bread will not fail me."

He sealed the letter and went to bed, exhausted.

But there was no sleep for him that night.

CHAPTER XXII

*I looked upon the visage of my sons.
I wept not: so all stone I felt within.
They wept: and one, my little Anselm, cried,
"Thou lookest so! Father, what ails thee?"*

Inferno

FOR three days Dante did not stir from his room. Then Can Grande sent for him to inquire as to his absence from the common table.

"Are you doing penance for some sin you've seen expiated in your *Purgatorio*?" he jested.

Dante's face was lined with sleepless nights. "It is penance for the penance I refuse to do," he said with quiet bitterness.

"What do you mean?"

Dante showed him the letter.

Can Grande read it swiftly. "I haven't heard of such a decree from Florence," he said, puzzled.

"My informant is a trustworthy man. It will be published."

The young lord glanced at him curiously. "You seem the reverse of elated, my Dante," he observed. "Of course, I shall be most unhappy to lose you."

"I'm not leaving."

"Eh? I thought your sole desire was to return."

"Not under the conditions indicated. I've already written in refusal."

"If it's the amount of the fine, I'll be glad to——"

"It's no question of money. It's the degradation, the humiliation. I'm no criminal that must plead, cap in hand, for mercy. I shall never return."

Can Grande stared. Then, impulsively, his hand went out to the arm of Dante. "There are not many like you in this world, Messer Alighieri. You have taught me a lesson this day that I hope never to forget." His voice shook a little. "Stay by my side as long as you will."

A week later Dante sat in the garden behind the palace, harkening to the soft flow of the fountain, watching the blue June sky through the interlacing of the trees, and meditating on the second canto of *Purgatorio*. As a thought struck him, or a phrase, he made a note on the tablets that never quit his belt.

The tears stood in his eyes, so strongly did the power of his own

fantasy move him. For he was writing of Casella, the musician, who years before had set his poems to music. Casella was dead, as all the friends of his youth were dead. And Casella still lingered at the base of Purgatory, waiting his turn to climb the painful Mount. He saw him there—he, Dante—even now. Dante stood with Virgil, his gentle guide. Casella, from the throng of the saved, darted forward with a cry to embrace him. Alas, their mutual hands met in empty air; for spirit and mortal man might not embrace. But how they spoke in eager discourse, reminding each other of happy days on earth. And Casella, in a voice of more than mortal sweetness, began to sing.

Dante sat in the garden, head inclined towards the tree above, listening. That was not a bird making melody in the leafy bows. That was Casella singing. He smiled amid his tears and peace came upon his countenance. For Casella was singing:

*Love, that discourses in my thoughts,
Yearningly of my lady . . .*

In such wise had Casella sung Dante's song many years ago, when both were young and filled with joy. And now he was singing it again.

But even as he listened, eyes half closed in the garden, there was movement. For Cato, stern Stoic guardian of the Mount, came suddenly upon them and drove them like a flock of pigeons scattering: "How is this, ye tardy spirits? What negligence detains you loitering here? Run to the mountain to cast off those scales that conceal from your eyes the sight of God!"

The tablets fell from Dante's hand, for he, too, took fright from that stern voice and would have hastily departed.

But the movement didn't cease. The rustle on the grass grew louder. A voice spoke in his ear. "Are you, sir, Messer Dante Alighieri?"

Dante started up trembling, clutching for his fallen tablets. "Yes, yes," he cried hurriedly. "I am going, noble Cato. But where is Virgil, my master and my guide?"

Then his vision cleared and the high fantasy fell from him. Two young men stood before him. Their gaze was startled, and they looked from him to each other.

Dante passed his hand over his face. "Forgive me, young sirs. I was meditating on my poem and methought I saw and heard—well, no matter. I am Alighieri. What do you wish with me?"

The older of the two was in his early twenties. He was tall and of a dark complexion. He carried himself with a settled gravity, and a carefully tended beard barely hid his chin. He wore the dark robe of a lawyer and the pouch from his belt further proclaimed his profession.

The younger was rounder of face and of a lighter shade. His expression was good-humoured and his clothes were of a more youthful, gayer fashion.

The older inclined his head towards Dante. "Father," he said in a slow, grave voice, as though he were reciting a brief, "we are your sons. I am Pietro; this, my brother, Jacopo. Greetings!"

The air in the garden chilled. The fountain stopped its splashing and became a thing of ice. The wheeling heavens stood still. He was still adream, thought Dante. For in a dream one tries to move and cannot. His limbs were stone and fixed immovably to earth. His lips were weighted lead and refused to open.

"I said we are your sons, sir," repeated Pietro, a trifle impatiently. Still Dante did not speak or move.

The lively tears brimmed in the eyes of the younger lad. "Father!" he cried. "Why do you stare at us so? Does anything ail you?"

Now he knew it was a dream. He had been sitting in the sun too long, and his book had fastened in his brain. For so he had made the young son of Ugolino cry out to his father in captivity.

Pietro was disturbed. Was it true what some had said in Florence—that his father was a trifle addled in his mind? But Jacopo flung himself upon the bosom of this silent, careworn man and sobbed upon his breast. "Speak to us, Father! Please break this dreadful silence! For we have come to join you in your exile."

The pound of youthful heart upon his own, the sudden break of youthful voice that brought back distant memories, quivered through his being. The sheath of stone crashed into a thousand pieces. Life rushed back into his veins. With a cry he took this son of his into his arms and held him tight.

"Are you indeed my son, Jacopo?" The tears burst forth to unlock the frozen springs within. He clung a moment to this flesh of his flesh; then turned to embrace his older son. Pietro returned the embrace with a grave sedateness.

Dante gazed upon them as though he could not gaze his fill. They had been little children when he had quit Florence, never to return. Now they were young men, in prime of manhood. He wiped his eyes. "Forgive me, sons, for this womanish behaviour. But it's been so long—I heard you were driven from Florence, even as I."

"It is true." A flicker of passion broke the severity of Pietro's countenance. "We worked too openly for your recall, and the masters of Florence told us we were scoundrels and sent us into banishment."

"How could they?" wondered Dante. "Only a few days ago they offered me return."

The young men looked at each other. Pietro shook his head. "You

are mistaken, Father. Your name was specifically excluded from the list of pardons."

Dante was bewildered. "But I received letters from friends in Florence. They didn't tell me this."

"They must have sent the letters before the decree was issued. There were those who continued to work secretly for you, and they might have thought they had assurances."

So his brave defiance had been ridiculous, thought Dante. He had refused what had not been offered. Well, it didn't matter.

"I didn't know," he said. "But I turned it down, anyway. I desire no such pardon as they saw fit to extend. But how about you, my sons?" he asked suddenly. "Were you excluded, too?"

"No, Father."

"Have you—have you then accepted?" Dante didn't know his hands were clenched and the sweat was streaming down his limbs.

The young men looked at each other again. "They have accepted," thought Dante dully. "Well, why shouldn't they?" he defended. "They are young and their lives lie ahead in Florence. What does a space of humiliation mean to them? There's no reason why they should be as stubborn and proud as I am."

"We haven't accepted," said Pietro stiffly.

"Did you think we were base enough to do so?" cried Jacopo passionately. "We decided, Pietro and I, that now we were in exile we wouldn't go back without you. The world is wide and we can make our living elsewhere."

Dante folded them to his breast. This time even Pietro responded warmly; then withdrew as if ashamed of his display of emotion.

"It is well," said Dante brokenly. "You are indeed my sons. But where will you go, and how will you live?"

"Pietro is a lawyer," declared Jacopo. "He studied in Padua and they considered him excellent in Florence before this happened. Surely there is practice for him here in Verona."

"And you, my Jacopo?"

The young man looked shamefaced. "I have no calling," he said. "I never hankered after the professions. I—I have a turn for poetry."

"Good!" cried Dante. "What's wrong with that? Am I not also a poet? Never fear, my sons, you shall get along. I'll speak for you to Can Grande."

He stared at them wistfully. It was incredible that he was united to his children. But his daughters? His thought leaped first to his youngest child—she whom he had named Beatrice.

"How," he asked hesitatingly, "is my little Beatrice?"

Jacopo smiled. "Little?" he echoed. "She is almost nineteen and

tall. She is golden-haired and greenish-blue of eye, not like the rest of us dark Alighieri. She is the most serious creature you ever met." He glanced slyly at his brother. "Oh, even more serious than Pietro."

Dante's thoughts roamed back to the other Beatrice. "It is a miracle," he whispered. "I was inspired from Heaven to call her Beatrice."

"It would do you well, Jacopo," spoke Pietro severely, "to have a little more of our dignity and less of flightiness." He turned to his father. "As soon as we are settled," he said, "Beatrice intends to join us. She thinks Florence a wicked city and no place for a Christian."

"She talks all the time of entering a nunnery," added Jacopo. "Though why a beautiful girl like our Beatrice wants to hide herself is beyond me."

For a moment Dante was taken aback. Then he reflected. Why not? What better road was there to bliss eternal than in the quiet habit of a nun? Hadn't Piccarda Donati taken the same path and been wrested from it only by the brutal force of that monster, Corso? Yet, when she died, it was certain she had gone to Paradise.

He inquired about the older daughter, Antonia.

Jacopo made a face. "Antonia is married to Tano di Bencivenni, and good riddance, too. *She* thinks Florence fine. All she talks about are clothes, dances, scandal. Poor Tano! She rules him with a pickled rod."

"That's no way to speak about your own sister," reproved Pietro.

"Well, it's so."

Even as a child, thought Dante, Antonia had shown marked resemblance to her mother.

Her mother? He had avoided asking about Gemma. Now decency compelled him.

"Mother is well," Pietro said briefly. "She managed to save the house and its furnishings through her kin."

"Is—is she content?"

"She is content."

Dante sighed relief. He had been afraid that Gemma might suddenly deem it her wifely duty to join her exiled husband.

Thus relieved, he asked more heartily about all the others. Lapa, poor soul, had died a year before. On her death-bed she had called her own children and Dante's children to her privately, and begged them never to forget their half-brother and their father. He was, she had declared, as dear to her as any of her own.

The tears sprang to Dante's eyes. She had been a true mother to him. He vowed to pray for her incessantly, to speed her kindly soul through Purgatory. Francesco, her son, and her two daughters, were

well and prospering. Francesco had assumed the guardianship of Dante's children when they were young and done what he could to rescue their poor inheritance from the wreckage of confiscation.

When all the news had been rendered, Dante took his sons proudly to Can Grande.

The young lord said graciously: "They are fine young men, my Dante, and a credit to you. Since they wish to live in Verona, we must do something for them."

"I had that in mind."

He turned to Pietro. "You are a lawyer? We can make use of another lawyer in Verona. If you have any part of your father's talent for affairs of state, I might even employ you in some offices."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

"As for Jacopo, what did you say you were?"

Jacopo blushed. "I thought to be a poet," he murmured.

"Even more like your father, eh?" Can Grande smiled. "But that will hardly give you a livelihood. Let me see. The canonry of San Giorgio is providentially vacant. Suppose I grant it to you; its revenue will keep you while you ply your art of poetry."

"I am most grateful," stammered Jacopo.

"And you, my Dante?" demanded Can Grande affectionately. "What more can I do for you?"

Dante bowed. "Let me continue my *Comedy* in peace."

For two years they dwelt in Verona. Pietro became a most successful lawyer. He hid his youth behind his growing beard, and he sedulously cultivated the tone and bearing of a grave and dignified advocate. Can Grande employed him on some minor missions and found these executed with such fidelity and care that he advanced him rapidly in his confidence.

Since Jacopo was now a canon—though he performed no duties for his benefice—it was decided after long discussion that it might be better if he entered Holy Orders.

"But I have no vocation for the clergy," he protested. "I want to be a poet."

"You can be a poet, too," his father advised him. "At least, in Orders, you can be assured of your future. Who knows what other benefices you may achieve?"

He had read some of his son's poetry and it struck him as laboured and pedantic. He feared Jacopo had the desire, but not the genius. It was better that he be properly placed.

Jacopo yielded finally, though with an ill grace. He took the first step in the Orders.

Beatrice came from Florence a few months after her brothers.

Though Dante had been prepared from his son's descriptions, nevertheless his heart thumped wildly. Had that other Beatrice come back to earth in the person of his daughter?

She was tall for a girl, and slimly graceful. Her hair was a shining gold and her skin was fair and slightly pale. Her eyes were green like— No, they were bluer in shade than green. And her mien was serious, so that her face didn't light up even at the sight of this stranger who was her father.

He held her long in his arms. "So, my Beatrice, you've decided to share our exile?"

"I've decided to become the bride of Christ," she said quietly. "Mother wouldn't permit it while I remained in Florence. So I came away."

"You see how it is!" Jacopo threw up his hands in mock despair.

Dante was a little repelled by his daughter's candour. "Why do you wish to become a nun?" he asked.

"What other life is more fitting on this sinful earth? Why do *you* write your *Comedy* if not to exhort mankind to change their ways and strive for holiness?"

It was a direct question to which he had no answer.

"Well, we shall see," he said. "In the meantime there is no hurry."

"Each day lost is a day taken from eternity."

He smiled. "But eternity still remains," he pointed out.

With his sons and daughter about him Dante felt at peace. Even the burning for Florence quieted down. He resumed his walks and his writing. The *Purgatorio* went forward at a rapid pace. He climbed the steep terraces and saw those who had lingered until the end before repenting; and the proud, crushed under the weight of many stones. He, too, felt crushed and humbled as he wrote. For was not this his own prime sin? Had he not wrestled throughout life with his incessant pride? Would not this alone keep him in Purgatory for many earthly generations? *Blessed are the poor in spirit!* he sang in company with the penitent.

He beheld the envious, with their eyes sewed up with iron threads; he groped with the angry through a fog more dense than the passion which had misted them on earth; he spoke to the avaricious, prone amid the dust. He shouted with the others: *Glory in the highest be to God!* when the mountain shook, proclaiming that another shriven soul had risen, clean, to Paradise. He met Forese among the gluttons and found his earthly paunch shrunk to hollowness and withered skin. He passed through the fiery furnace of the lustful. And finally he achieved

the apex of the Mount, where Eden was—from which our ancient parents had been expelled for man's first disobedience. Here he beheld the mystic procession of the Church Triumphant. Here Virgil, who had led him safe through Hell and up the Mount, departed. For Earthly Wisdom could guide him no further. Beatrice came, Divinely Wise, instead.

When she came, robed in hue of living flame, even as she had appeared to him many times in vision, Dante shook with all the virtue of his ancient love. He laid his head down on the table at which he wrote and wept. His tears blotted the fresh ink of that which he had written. His years fled from him and he was once more a boy trembling in the presence of divinity; once more a youth pale and shaken in the streets at the sight of her; once more the terrible anguish that assailed him at her wedding renewed its ancient grief. Once more he cried, "There is no dram of blood that doth not quiver in me!"

He bowed in humbleness at her anger for his erring life, and drank obediently of the waters of Lethe and bathed in the crystal stream of Eunoë. With a trembling hand he wrote:

*Made over, and washed clean of ancient scars,
Like a new tree renewed with foliage new,
Pure and disposed to mount up to the stars.*

He had come to the end of the *Purgatorio*.

But he didn't arise from the table. For a long time he sat, while the room slowly darkened and the stars came out, one by one, and the night breeze stirred and rustled among his papers.

CHAPTER XXIII

*There Ravenna stands, as it has stood
These many years. There Polenta's eagle broods;
And in his broad circumference of plume
O'ershadows Cervia.* *Inferno*

COUNT GUIDO NOVELLO DA POLENTA, lord of Ravenna and the surrounding country, came visiting his friend and neighbour of Verona. He came on a special quest, with only a few of his closest retinue, and he required no pomp or ceremony of entertainment.

Dante paid little heed to this visit, for he held aloof from the court life of Can Grande and its incessant excitements. He found little time even for his children, since he was engaged in the final revision of the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. He hoped, within the year, to have them prepared for publication. Pietro and Jacopo would help in making copies. Pietro's script was neat and precise, like a lawyer's; and Jacopo's, if a trifle round and childish, was legible enough.

That he couldn't see them as often as he liked didn't matter much. They were men, settled in a way of life, and able to care for themselves. But Beatrice was another affair. Though many of Can Grande's court were more than eager to squire her and pay her worshipful attention, she rebuffed all gallantries and spent her time in reading books of devotion. It bothered Dante. He had hoped, by gentle talk and force of circumstance, to wean her from her intention. She was not to be moved. Her resolution grew daily more unalterable.

"It is only through respect for your wishes that I wait this long to take the vows, dear Father," she declared.

Dante sighed. "I only wish to make sure you will not regret the step later. If it is your true vocation, I shall not stand in your way. But wait a year. You are young, and you may change your mind."

"I shall wait, Father; but I won't change my mind."

Count Guido lingered several days at Verona. The court buzzed with rumours over the reason for his coming. Was there another war impending, and did Ravenna seek the valour of Can Grande in alliance?

On the fourth day Dante was summoned to Can Grande's private chamber. He went unwillingly, for he had found a flaw in his treatment of the episode of Paolo and Francesca in the fifth canto of the *Inferno*. He had fixed upon a method of solution, and he was afraid it might slip from mind if he quit it in the middle. But the summons of Can Grande was not lightly to be denied.

He found Can Grande closeted with Count Guido of Ravenna. The

Count was a pleasant-looking man of middle age, with a well-shaped beard and a smile that was frank and open. But Can Grande appeared disturbed.

He stared a moment at Dante while the latter bowed and waited. He fingered his sword, then began abruptly: "Count Guido, whom you doubtless know, wishes to speak to you. I have given my permission." Then he turned away and bit his lip.

Dante bowed in the count's direction. "I know Count Guido by reputation only; but that is sufficient to make him known to all the world."

The count smiled. "I hope my reputation is not in my disfavour, Messer Alighieri."

"On the contrary. It is said that under your guidance Ravenna has become a second seat of the Muses and a worthy rival to Paris and Bologna."

Guido's smile widened. "I am glad to hear you say so, for my visit to Verona is on that very matter. I have done what I could to make Ravenna a seat of learning. But you flatter when you compare us to Paris and Bologna. They are mighty universities and I've been able to establish only the humblest *studium*. I have scholars enough who are anxious to learn—I myself am such a scholar—but alas, I have few teachers and none to compare in knowledge and achievements with those of the towns you've mentioned. I am ready to do exceedingly well for such a man if I can find him."

Dante looked puzzled. "I don't think I know of any, Your Grace. I've been out of touch with the learned world for some time."

"What Count Guido wishes to say, my Dante," said Can Grande, turning suddenly, "is that he is prepared to make you such an offer."

"I, Your Grace?" he ejaculated. "Why, I'm no teacher."

"Let me be the judge of that," Guido assured him. "One who has written such a masterpiece on the arts of poetry and language as *De Vulgari Eloquentia* or such a learned commentary as the *Convivio* is a far better teacher than any pedant who learns by rote and teaches, not from example, but by the book."

Dante hesitated. It was a tempting offer. The count was known for his liberality, and Ravenna in truth was more suited to his needs than the swarming court of Verona where, aside from young Can Grande, no one considered a scholar as any higher than a mountebank. Then he shook his head.

"Lord Can Grande has been a kind and generous patron. I couldn't dream of leaving him unless he wishes me to go."

There were marks of struggle on Can Grande's face. "I've considered you the chief ornament of my court, my Dante," he said. "I had hoped to have your *Comedy* associated in the eyes of the world with Verona for all time to come. But, much as it hurts me personally, I think it

best for you to accept Count Guido's offer." He raised his hand to halt Dante's movement of rejection. "I know what you're going to say, and I thank you in advance; but listen to me further." His smile was rueful. "I've tried to make Verona into what Count Guido has managed with more success at Ravenna. But the demands of the Imperial Eagle have kept me pretty much in the field and in camp. My captains are good soldiers, but not exactly given to the study of books. My court people, worse luck, are a vain and selfish lot. If I had the time and means, I'd send them packing. You'd be much better off in Ravenna."

"Your sentiments do you credit, Messer Alighieri," the count broke in. "I hope you'll be as loyal to me as you are to Can Grande. If you come, I'll make you head of all the schools. I'll give you a private dwelling where you can work at your book in peace. I'll make no demands on you that you aren't willing to fulfil freely. And I'll prove most liberal in your care."

Still Dante shook his head. "You're both most kind. But my sons are settled in Verona. I've only just regained them and I wouldn't want to part again."

"Your son, Pietro, is a lawyer?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"I'll see to it he gets an equal practice in Ravenna. To give him a start I'll grant him two lucrative benefices—Santa Maria di Zenzanigola and San Simone di Muro."

Those were ample revenues for Pietro, Dante reflected.

"There is Jacopo also," he said aloud.

"He needn't yield his present canonry," said Can Grande promptly.

There were other objections, but either Guido or Can Grande met each one. Dante was overwhelmed. "This is rather sudden, my lords," he said finally. "Give me a few days in which to consider and consult with my sons." It wasn't necessary to consult with Beatrice. It would be a matter of indifference to one whose eyes were fixed on a nun's retreat where she was in the flesh while waiting.

"Take a week or more, Messer Alighieri," agreed Guido. "As long as you decide in the end to come."

Pietro was delighted. He had made a success in Verona, but the thought of the two benefices with their revenues dazzled him. Jacopo interposed no objection. The income from his canonry would come in just the same; and he felt that the reason for the failure of his laboured verse was due to the unfriendly atmosphere of Verona. In Ravenna, he was convinced, his genius would expand and flower. As Dante had suspected, Beatrice was wholly indifferent.

Within two days he met his patrons again. "Do you still wish me to go?" he asked Can Grande directly.

The young lord grimaced. "You put it badly, my Dante. I don't wish it, but I feel you must. It is for your own good I send you away."

Dante turned to Count Guido. "Then I accept, my lord; but on one condition."

"Name it."

"I've been in the habit, as I finished several cantos of my *Comedy*, to send the first copy to Lord Can Grande. It had been also my intention, when it was finished, to dedicate the entire work to him. I don't want to change this plan."

Guido looked disappointed, but he rallied a smile. "Your feeling in the matter is just as well as natural. I wouldn't dream of objecting."

"Then I am agreed."

Can Grande came to him. "You know how to take the edge from parting," he said. "I shall be proud to be the first to read your cantos, my Dante. And I have a feeling," he added, "that my name will be chiefly known to future generations as the man to whom your book was dedicated."

Count Guido was as good as his word. He settled Dante in a small house of his own, with ample garden space and a splendid view of the great Pinetta, or Pine Forest of Ravenna, that stretched for many miles down to the shores of the Adriatic. Here Beatrice lived with him and was accustomed to walk in the cool of the garden and read intently in her books of saints and martyrs.

Jacopo established himself in a nearby diocesan chapter, still doubtful whether he would continue in Orders. Pietro thought it necessary to take up residence at the court, where the legal business centred.

So Dante had at last that privacy he most desired. He was free to come and go as he pleased, to walk where he wished, to retire in close meditation if he so desired, or entertain new-made friends and kindred scholars. And Count Guido gave him a regular allowance which was sufficient for his needs, if not for luxuries.

But Dante wished for no luxuries. His tastes were simple and his fare frugal. He had a place to sleep in, and a place to work. He was old now, and worn beyond his years with toil and suffering. His beard was streaked with grey, and his hair also, so that it was no longer possible for a simple woman to deduce his journey into Hell from the singed blackness of his hair.

He had reached his final haven, he thought, with a tinge of sadness. He was fifty-three, and his remaining years would be spent in Ravenna. It was as good a place as any; the one spot on earth toward which his heart had never ceased its yearning had closed its gates against him forever.

It wasn't good for a man to taste the salt bread of exile, he thought,

nor climb up and down another's stairs. The roots of man struck deep in his native city; uprooted, he was not complete. Well, he would be content and not repine too much. Count Guido's bread was not too salt, nor his stairs too steep and narrow. Some day, perhaps, when he was dead, Florence would relent of her stiff-necked injustice and inhumanity. It would be too late then.

For the first few weeks he collected himself and his belongings. He explored this city that was to be his home. It was an ancient town and filled with memories and ruins of a vaster, earlier time. Here had been the seat of the Roman Empire in its declining days. Here, while the sea still laved its walls—that sea which had retreated many miles and left them stranded amid surrounding marsh and forest—the emperors and their Gothic conquerors had taken their ease and ruled the extensive remains of Caesar's glory and of Trajan's. On every hand the evidences of those mighty days were not lacking. The huge Roman walls still stood proud and pre-eminent, although the solid masonry was crumbling and the ivy clambered in the crevices. He visited the mausoleum of Galla Placidia, daughter of the great Theodosius, and saw her effigy in repose between her brother, Honorius, and her husband, Constantine III. He gazed on the noble splendour of the Basilica Ursiana, with its aisles and golden sculptures. He wandered along the banks of the Padenna as it rambled through the town, porticoed churches lined on either side. He stared upward at the round Bell Tower that overhung the river.

But chiefly he delighted in roaming the cool, mysterious stretches of the Pinetta. Amid its ancient trees of pine, shutting out the sun at noon and fragrant with the spicy smell of juniper and myrtle, a great peace settled on his lacerated spirit and God stole into his heart. Here, he vowed, he would spend his days, meditating on the divine splendours of the *Paradiso* and invoking the Lady Beatrice for aid in its completion.

But first he had his school to organize. Count Guido had been patient with his delay, but it wasn't fair to delay any longer.

Guido Novello had spoken the truth. Ravenna swarmed with students, but there were few teachers; and those few were arid pedants. And more young scholars, especially fledgling poets, were coming hastily from Romagna, from Tuscany, and from the valley of the Po when the word was spread that Dante Alighieri would teach them.

It amazed Dante to find that he had grown famous during the long years of his exile. His earlier works circulated from hand to hand in hundreds of copies. The *Inferno* was fast taking its place beside them. Men read and shuddered at the vivid torments of damnation; they were pleased or indignant at the people he had boldly placed within the pit. The *Purgatorio* was known by rumour and by excerpts. Within a month or so Dante intended to have copies made and sent around.

But chiefly the young men came to learn the art of poetry, and to hear from his own lips what he had not finished expounding in his treatise *On the Vulgar Tongue*. Chiefly they hoped to learn what he thought of Italian as the true poetic language. They were getting restless in the learned Latin and felt their genius clipped by its formal grammar and pedantic turns.

Dante set up first a school of rhetoric. He held it in the great hall of the court, so that his house might not be invaded at unseemly hours by pupils. The hall filled to overflowing. Count Guido Novello da Polenta sat in the very front, under the red eagle on a shield of gold which was his coat of arms. He fancied himself a poet and had written some halting sonnets. But he was the first to bow before the acknowledged mastery of Dante.

The ageing exile was proud, and yet humble, in the presence of this concourse which had come to sit and drink his words. Perhaps his life had not been wholly wasted.

He commenced his first lecture with a tribute to the Eagle of Polenta—he glanced at Count Guido—who had made this *studium* possible with his lordly liberality and generous patronage of the arts. Then he plunged into the meat of the matter.

"There is a science of language," he declared, "of which few have seen fit to treat. And no one, before me, has even considered a science of vernacular language, or the common, living speech of people.

"I have meditated much on these themes since I wrote *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and the *Convivio*. I have changed some of my opinions. I no longer feel that there is any limit to the field of Italian as a literary language. Poems of martial deeds and courtly behaviour are equally at home with the poetry of love in the speech of the people. Did not the Romans use their own tongue for their immortal productions? Did not those few who wrote in imitative Greek suffer merited oblivion for their defection? Let us imitate the Romans in this judiciousness. If we wish the people to read us, let us write for them in a tongue they understand. That is not to say that books of learning should not be written in the learned Latin, for they are to be read by the scholars of all the world, from Britain to Byzantium. But poetry, which is feeling and passing, which deals with the human heart and the infinitudes of the human soul, requires the speech which is nearest the heart—the living speech by which it is accustomed daily to express itself. There are those who frown upon the vernacular as vulgar and a thing of no beauty. Let those sceptics read the immortal verse of Guinizelli, of those dear dead friends of mine, Guido Cavalcanti and Lapo Gianni; let them read in particular the sonnets of Cino of Pistoia, who, praise God! is still alive; and let them dare say that Italian, in the Tuscan tongue, is not the noblest of languages."

"How about your own canzoni, Messer Alighieri?" someone cried.

"Yes, let them read mine, too," he retorted proudly. "Therefore I say, Messers, write in the tongue of the vulgar if you wish satisfaction for yourselves and immortality for your verse."

They applauded and stamped with their feet when he had finished. The young poets crowded about him, eyes ashine with the new light, each secretly determined to be the Dante Alighieri of the new and greater generation.

At future lectures he discoursed on the technique of the various forms of verse. To those he had discussed in his treatise he now added the terza-rima of his own invention. "It is intricate and difficult to use," he admitted, "but there is no other form so adapted in Italian, with its linked tercets, to give the effect of the melodious hexameters of Virgil in his native Latin."

He made them try their hand at verse in the terza-rima, but the results were so bad that he abandoned the attempt and returned to the older and simpler forms of the canzone, sonnet, and ballata.

His lectures were so successful and the students other than poets so numerous that he added a second series on more learned subjects, in which he employed the *Convivio* as the text. He was even invited to Mantua to deliver a single lecture, in the course of which the point was raised whether there were places where water was relatively higher than land on the surface of the earth. He confessed candidly he was not prepared to discuss the point without further consideration.

When he returned to Ravenna he went more thoroughly into the question and decided that at no place on earth was the level of the sea higher than the land. He embodied his conclusions in a treatise which he named *Quaestio de Aqua et Terra*; and on the further invitation of Can Grande, who had heard of the dispute, he delivered a public dissertation on his thesis in the church of Sant' Elena at Verona.

After long revision Dante finally published his *Purgatorio*. Both his sons, and even his daughter, worked for weeks making careful copies; and these were sent, after the first to Can Grande, the second to Count Guido, the third to Cino of Pistoia, to learned men and friends all over Italy.

The young men of Italy hailed the *Purgatorio* as even finer than the *Inferno*. Cino wrote him a long, congratulatory epistle in verse. Immanuel, the Jew, from his own refuge in exile, wrote a pathetic and affectionate letter.

"I, too, dear friend," he said, "have been in Hell and am not yet wholly out of it. At present I am well and have found a patron. To earn his favour I am collecting all my poems and making them into a volume. It will be slight enough, I fear, since I am determined to omit all the erotic verse that pleased my youth. And without them, what is there left?

"But the receipt of your magnificent *Comedy* has given me an idea. I, too, will write a journey through Heaven and Hell. For I, too, have gone through sin and yearn towards holiness. There will be no Purgatory, for our religion has no place for such an intermediate state. One is either saved or damned, and there's an end to it.

"Instead of Virgil I shall employ the prophet, Daniel, as my guide. If you should feel like discovering, under the guise of Daniel, my true mentor in this undertaking by taking the first three letters of his name and adding two more with which you should be most familiar, I shall be proud and flattered.

"Nor must you think, O Dante, that this projected imitation is a vain attempt to rival what you've done. I expect it to be most pedestrian—as befits my gifts—and but a testimonial to the overpowering splendour of your work.

"Our paths have diverged. We may never meet again in life. But I have a profound conviction that the orthodox of both our religions are wrong. I believe that God is truly universal and all-embracing. In His bosom there are neither Christians nor Jews, Saracens, nor pagans. There are only the just and righteous, and the wicked. I pray that when our time shall come, we'll find ourselves together."

Not all the responses were wholly laudatory. From the University in Bologna the famous teacher, Giovanni del Virgilio, sent Dante an epistle couched in protesting Latin hexameters. He had taken the name of Virgil as his patronymic to display his idolatrous admiration for that poet and for all things Latin. In the form of a Virgilian eclogue he expressed his grief that such a noble poet as Dante, dealing with such lofty topics, should have seen fit to use the crude Italian instead of the classic Latin. The study of the classics, he lamented, had suffered a sharp decline in Bologna. Only the doctors of law waxed rich, while he, sole defender of the ancient lore, struggled in poverty and was scorned by the practical students. In the beloved tongue he asked:

*Why wilt thou still such lofty topics treat
For the rude herd, while we, with study pale
Read nothing from thee, poet though thou art?*

He implored him:

*I pray thee, choose
The speech that will most widely give thee fame
For thy prophetic song, the common lot
Of this and of that nation . . .*

If he did, he, Virgilio

*Will gladly be the first to lead thee forth
'Mid crowds of loud-applauding worshippers,
Thy temples crowned with wreaths of fragrant bays.*

"Yes," he cried, "in any event come to Bologna and I shall be proud to invest you with the laurel crown before the assembled students."

Dante read the eclogue and was pleased. He knew of Virgilio and of his valiant, single-handed efforts to bring literature to the closed minds of the lawyers of Bologna. But he knew as well that the cause was lost. The times were practical and sordid. The pursuit of wealth was the single object. Latin was ill and would not heal. If he wished to touch this avaricious world he must, as he, Dante, had done, write in the speech of the future and help create a new and vigorous thirst for poetry in the hearts of the common folk who knew not Latin or the Eclogues of Virgil.

Go to Bologna and be crowned with laurel? All his life he had dreamed of such a consummation. It was his sole remaining vanity.

He discussed Virgilio's invitation with a young friend and new assistant in his lectures, Dino Perini, a notary of Florence who had come to study the poetic art with the exiled master.

Dino was delighted. "Surely you will accept, Messer Alighieri," he exclaimed. "Think what an honour it will be."

"It would make stir enough," Dante confessed. "In this age when poetry and poets have fallen into neglect, it would be a startling innovation for Bologna, that decries all poetry as useless, to give me a crown." His expression saddened. "Would that it were Florence that offered it to me!"

"Florence is a den of thieves," said his disciple indignantly. "Some day they'll regret their course. But meanwhile time flies. A second generation comes to Ravenna and finds you lingering. Go to Bologna, Messer Alighieri!"

It was, indeed, a tempting prospect. To be crowned in the great University whose fame stretched to every corner of the world! But still he hesitated. How safe was he in Bologna? For Bologna was bitter Guelf, and Dante was an outlaw to all Guelfs. The city swarmed with enemies only too eager to get this arch-defender of the Empire into their clutches. Dante had no mind to be delivered to the vengeance of the Florentines and to the fire or axe.

"I shall not go, Dino," he decided finally.

He wrote an eclogue to Virgilio, couched in the same Virgilian imagery:

*What echoes will from hills and fields resound,
If with a laurelled brow I tune my lyre
To pæan hymns? And yet I own I fear
The thickets wild, and fields that know not God.
Were it not better done to deck my locks
With triumph-wreath, and should I e'er return
Where my own Arno flows, to hide them there,
Now gray, once golden, 'neath the laurel crown?*

Dino undertook to take this eclogue to Virgilio in Bologna, and in due time returned with that learned doctor's reply. Virgilio was in transports that the great poet had condescended to respond in Virgilian stanzas and in the beloved tongue. In a transport of gratitude he hailed Dante as second Tityrus, or Virgil. He breathed equal indignation with Dante over the ungrateful city of Florence. But why not then come to Bologna, where

*Once more thou mightest see thy locks,
Locks gray and sacred, gain a second youth.
... We both will sing;
I with my slender reed, thou playing still
The part of master, with more majesty.*

Dante needn't fear Bologna:

*No wiles are here,
No plots, as thou dost deem, of frauds and wrong;
Wilt thou not trust thyself to me who love thee?*

When Dino came back, breathless with excitement, he found Dante in the company of Fiduccio de' Milotti, a physician from Certaldo, who had retired from practice to learn the healing art of poetry. Fiduccio was an older man and better acquainted with the wiles of men than Dino, or the unworldly professor in Bologna.

"Don't go, Messer Alighieri," he advised. "Virgilio means well, but his influence in Bologna is clearly insufficient to protect you from your enemies. Here, under Count Guido, you're secure. You've already achieved fame; in the days to come it will grow and spread. Why venture into the cave of the Guelfs, who'd be only too eager to lay hands upon you? What would we do then, your disciples, here in Ravenna?"

Dino was distressed, "But Virgilio assured me you'd be absolutely safe," he protested. "He's made inquiries."

"Virgilio is a fool," retorted Fiduccio. "They're using him as bait to draw you in."

Dante was of the same opinion. The plighted word was of little worth among political antagonists. He took the matter to Count Guido.

Guido agreed with Fiduccio. "Stay here with me, Dante. No harm can come to you in Ravenna. In Bologna I couldn't protect you."

The Dryads of Ravenna had called on him to stay, he wrote Virgilio. And Virgil, too, had warned him in these words:

*O blest old man,
Trust not delusive favour: look with pity
Upon the hallowed spot where Dryads haunt,
And on thy flocks. The mountain heights, the downs,
The streams, will weep, bereaved of thee: the Nymphs,
Fearing worse things, will weep for thee with me.*

So he remained in Ravenna, and never achieved the laurel crown for which his soul thirsted.

Count Guido was thankful for his decision. Under Dante's tutelage Ravenna had become a resort for all the talented young men of Italy. While Bologna stifled in the law and Paris retreated into mediocrity, the fresh wind of the future breathed its gentle airs upon the ancient town of Ravenna.

Guido found further employment for Dante as a skilled negotiator. Dante performed his missions with notable success. He had learned much in the long and bitter years; and his knowledge of the feuds and tangled skeins of Italy was unrivalled. He accepted these interruptions to his writing with repressed impatience. Yet he couldn't refuse his aid to the lord who provided both livelihood and protection.

He kept an eye open for his friends wherever possible. When Count Guido was in doubt which painter to employ for a series of frescoes in the chapel of San Giovanni Evangelista, he suggested Giotto. Giotto was then in Ferrara, finishing some work for the house of Este. At Guido's invitation he came on to Ravenna.

The meeting of the two old friends was touching. Dante's eyes misted. He remembered how, in the prime of life, he had sat and watched the young Giotto transfer with skilful strokes his image to the walls of the Podestà's Palace in Florence. It was a wonder his enemies hadn't destroyed this last vestige of his presence in their midst. He recalled the incident to Giotto.

The painter's ready smile faded. His lips locked in peasant stubbornness. "They dared not," he said grimly. "Had they touched but a hair of my work I never would have done another stroke for Florence."

"It will return me to the old days," said Dante, with a touch of sadness. "Once again I'll come to sit and watch while you paint."

"The presence of the most famous poet in Italy will be my inspiration," said Giotto courteously.

"I see you have achieved the courtier's tongue, my Giotto. But what subjects do you intend to place upon the chapel walls?"

"The portraits of the Evangelists and the great Church Fathers." His eyes lit up. "I hope to show them as living men who yet breathe forth the illumination of the Holy Spirit."

"If any mortal painter can paint man and spirit in a single union, it is you, my Giotto."

CHAPTER XXIV

The sacred song

*Whereunto heaven and earth have both set hand,
Making me lean this many a year long.*

Paradiso

DANTE knew that he had but little time to live. It wasn't that he was old, as the years of men are numbered. He was only fifty-four. But he was infinitely aged in vicissitude and experience; and he had been sick too long with hope invariably deferred. The curse of Florence was fastened on him, and he couldn't shake it free. That fatal and beloved city stared at him from the pages on which he wrote; it accompanied him on his solitary walks; it leered and mowed at him in his dreams. Ravenna was Ravenna; it wasn't Florence. The memory of each stone, each crooked street, filled him with an insupportable longing. Always he had hoped that some day return might be granted him—return with honour. But now he knew he would never see his native town again, never again see the house in which he was born. He was an old man, and he would die in Ravenna, an exile to the end.

Praise God at least his children were provided for! Jacopo had finally reconciled himself to the Church, and he was planning some day to write a commentary on his father's *Comedy*. Pietro was busy and most successful. Dante had yielded at last to Beatrice's persistent purpose. With the light of sanctity upon her face she had entered the convent of Santo Stefano dell' Uliua and was already past her novitiate. The Prioress praised the new nun's holiness and devotion.

Wherefore Dante set himself unceasingly at the *Paradiso*. If he had only a little time of life, each moment must be devoted wholly to the completion of this crowning work.

With a proud humility he girded his loins for the mighty task. He knew this division of his *Comedy* would have less readers than the others; for here he must wrestle with themes beyond human understanding. Yet he didn't draw back, or seek to ease the path for the slothful. Rather, he warned them:

*O ye who in a fragile craft thus long,
Eager to harken, have followed in the wake
Of this my ship, that singing sails along,
Turn back to keep in sight your safer coast;
Put ye not out to sea, lest peradventure
Once losing me, ye may yourselves be lost!*

His slow-paced figure, wrapped in thought, became a familiar sight in Ravenna. Each morning, with the dawn, he walked down the city's ways and through the gates until he reached the Pinetta. Here, with the pine needles crackling dryly underfoot, to the sound of moving leaves and plaintive birds, with the risen sun filtering pale and mysterious through the trees, he revolved in his mind the high themes and phrases of the *Paradiso*.

At noon his musing steps retraced their course to his isolated house, and there he worked and wrote until the stars came out. Then he lit the candles and went on until the wheeling Bear advised him it was time to seek his bed.

The Beatrice of his dreams returned. The vision that had deserted him many a year was now a faithful companion. He spoke to this Beatrice who was in Heaven. And she replied, lifting him on the pinions of her glory until all earth was a mere pin-point beneath.

The thin border between vision and reality had vanished. The world of his imagination—in which Beatrice breathed and dazzled with her smile—was now more real than the streets of Ravenna and the people whom he daily passed.

His dimming sight fixed her, unwavering, above his desk. Through the splendour of her eyes, he was drawn from heaven to heaven. Through the power of her love he soared through the circling spheres, closer, ever closer, to the last supernal sight of God.

As he rose and soared, he met the blessed spirits, at once concealed and yet revealed in lucent flames of joy and love. On the white forehead of the moon he found the glowing pearl that on earth had been Piccarda. From his lowest orb she hymned eternally to God and was content. "In His will is our peace!" she said with exceeding gladness.

The spheres flashed with purest fires and the joyous spirits wheeled in endless patterns of surpassing beauty. Here were no complaints or sighs or groans, as had paled his face in Hell; here reigned eternal love and rapture. From Mars to Venus, from the great Sun to Saturn, an infinite peace made all the heavens one. Warriors, scholars, lovers, princes, hermits, and saints united in a single, mighty congregation that sang hosanna to the Highest and laved in streams of light eternal.

From the shining lips of all the ages he learned the tremendous secrets of redemption, of faith and charity, and the ultimate resurrection. From the blessed Thomas of Aquino, on earth a Dominican, he heard the surpassing story of St. Francis; from Bonaventura, the Franciscan, came wondrous praise of St. Dominic. Yet each in turn scourged wrathfully the present degeneracy of his own Order and spoke in bitter language of straying in alien pastures while the wildered sheep go wandering.

In the ruddy gleam of Mars, Cacciaguida, from whose warrior loins Dante had descended, cried out at sight of him: "O thou my blood! O most exceeding grace divine! To whom as now to thee has ever the heavenly gate been twice unclosed?"

From Cacciaguida he heard of the golden age of Florence, when every man had been chaste and sober and abode in peace with all. "Then was no chain or coronet," he declared indignantly, "nor dames decked out, nor girdles to draw the eye more than they who wore them. As yet a daughter's birth struck not a father with dismay, for neither wedding day nor dowry was evaded. I, myself," he cried, "have seen a noble citizen pass, belted only with bone and leather, while his wife quit her mirror with unpainted face. I have seen him content enough with garments of simple leather and his womenfolk diligent with spindle and flax."

In a similar passion Dante wrote with flame-tipped pen: "Ah, puny nobility, how have you fallen from your ancient glory! For nobility is a mantle that soon shrinks and withers, unless you piece it with new cloth from day to day."

The wrathful warrior prophesied his exile and his bitter days, and exhorted him to cry the truth to the shameless ones on earth, and let who will writhe under the righteous lash.

Constantine, Solomon, Justinian, Charles Martel, Siger of Brabant, Albert of Cologne, St. Benedict, St. Francis, Boëthius—the pure and just of every land and every clime appeared in glory to the wanderer and spoke of that which had lain nearest his heart when clothed in body to the world beneath.

And now Dante flew to the heaven of the Fixed Stars, where the face of Beatrice shone with a light so keen and resplendent that the mighty sun itself was but a pale reflection.

Here Christ unfolded to his view, amid the hosts triumphant. Here he beheld the legions of splendour in likeness to a glowing rose, hymning with celestial voice the crowned flame of the Virgin Mary. Here the great Apostles examined Dante on the high problems of Faith, Hope and Charity and were content with their examination. Here St. Peter blazed in fierce denunciation of the corrupt Popes of the Church, and launched his wrath especially against Boniface:

*He who usurpeth upon earth my place,
My place, my place, which in the sight of Him,
The Son of God, is vacant of His grace,
A sewer of my burial-place hath made
Of blood and filth, whereby his lust perverse
Who fell from here, down yonder is allayed.*

"Open thy lips," he exhorted Dante, "and hide not below that which I do not hide."

Still gazing into Beatrice's eyes he rose to the swiftest heaven of the Primum Mobile, where for the first time he came to the sight of God as a distant point which nevertheless fills all infinity with its light. Around Him wheeled the Seraphim and the Cherubim and all the orders of the angels, flaming with love divine and echoing *Hosanna* from choir to choir.

Dante was now prepared for the last and ultimate flight of his tremendous journey. Up to the Emphyrean he soared, where light reigns supreme, where love has its centre and circumference, where there is neither space nor time.

He turned to Beatrice; and as he turned in Heaven, so Dante lifted his eyes from his writing and beheld Beatrice before him. He cried out at the vision and sought to shield his eyes. So perfect had become her beauty that

*Ever since I beheld her that first day
Still in this life, until this sight of her,
My song hath gone, unchallenged, on its way;
But now desist I must from the emprise
Of following her beauty with my verse;
Beyond his utmost can no artist rise.*

Dante dropped his pen. He stretched out his hands to Beatrice and spoke broken words. "We are coming to the end, Lady Beatrice. The end of life and of our journey. Shall I again behold you in those realms above, and shall we once more ascend to the source of all our love?"

Dino Perini, the young notary, walked softly through the garden. He desired urgently to speak to Dante on certain matters, but he dared not intrude on the master while he was engaged in writing.

However, when he heard voices issuing from the study, he thought that there were visitors and he was emboldened to enter.

He tapped softly on the inner door. There was no answer, but the voices continued. He opened the door. Dante's eyes were lifted, and an unearthly light glowed on his countenance.

"Beatrice! Lady Beatrice!" he cried, and raised his arms as though imploring an answer. "Shall you be again my guide when the final hour is come?"

Dino stopped in amazement. There was no one else in the room. Had solitude and incessant toil softened the wits of his master?

Then, slowly, something seemed to shimmer on the wall. The shimmer coalesced and grew into a glow of light. A face emerged, in likeness to a girl of eighteen. But the face was lit with angelic splendour

and the eyes gazed down upon the imploring man with infinite sweetness. Palsied as he was with awe and fear, it seemed to Dino that the vision spoke: "Yes, dear Dante, I shall be your guide."

Dante clasped his hands and tears of joy streamed down his face. "Thank you, Lady Beatrice! Until I knew, I had no further strength to continue."

He picked up his fallen pen and began to write again like one possessed. The face merged into a shimmer, the shimmer became a dancing ray of sunshine as it streamed in from the garden.

Life returned to Dino's limbs. In haste he stepped back through the door and shut it quietly behind him. Dante was still writing, rapidly, furiously. He had not been aware of Dino's presence.

The young notary staggered into the garden. His limbs were all atremble again. He had seen what it had not been right for him to see.

"It is no mere *Comedy* that the master writes," he whispered. "It is a *Divine Comedy*."

CHAPTER XXV

*In the Venetians' arsenal as boils
Through wintry months tenacious pitch, to smear
Their unsound vessels; for the inclement time
Sea-faring men restrains.*

Inferno

DANTE was just completing a letter to Can Grande, with which he intended to enclose the first cantos of the *Paradiso* for his inspection, when Count Guido walked alone into his house.

It was an unusual visit, considering the early morning hour and the seeming secrecy of his arrival. Dante arose immediately, pen still in hand, and bowed.

Count Guido was agitated. His eyes passed unseeing over the bound manuscript, fixed abruptly on Dante.

"Working as usual, my Dante?"

"Yes, my lord."

The count averted his eyes and paced up and down the small room. Dante waited. Guido turned and without pausing in his pacing, began to speak.

"I'm in trouble, Dante."

"Yes?"

"Serious trouble. You remember when some of my soldiers got into a fight with the crew of a Venetian vessel?"

"It was a drunken brawl."

"They were drunk, all right. But Venice refuses to look at it in that light. The ship captain was killed and a good many of the crew wounded."

"Surely the affair can be composed."

"The Venetians don't wish for a composition," said Guido bitterly. "There's been bad blood between us for some time. This is their chance to put us in the wrong and they've seized it. They're preparing for war, Dante. They wish to destroy Ravenna."

"War is serious, Count Guido. But you have allies."

Guido stopped short. "That's just the trouble. I've received word that Venice has managed by a liberal use of gold to withdraw them from us. Rimini, Cesena, Imola, Faenza—all of our neighbours on whom I depended—have joined Venice. I'm threatened with attack on all sides."

"Then you must come to an agreement with Venice at all costs."

"Exactly. But Venice is stubborn. I must send an ambassador with skill, knowledge, tact, and importance to treat with them. There is only one man in Ravenna who possesses all those qualifications."

Dante stared longingly at his desk where the sheets of the *Paradiso* were spread. He braced himself.

"That man is you," said Guido.

"But, Your Grace," protested Dante. "I am an old man, unfit for such a delicate task."

"Old? Do you call fifty-six old?"

"In my case, yes. I had hoped to spend my few remaining days in polishing my work."

"You'll have ample time. Within a month you'll be back."

Dante shook his head. "I'm afraid that——"

"You *must* take the embassy, Dante. Unless you wish me to end my days as a fugitive and exile."

"Heaven forbid! It is a bitter life." Dante sighed. "Very well, your Grace, when do I start?"

"At once. There's no time to lose. You have saved my life and I promise not to forget it."

"And lost my own," murmured Dante. Aloud he said: "I'll leave tomorrow."

On no other mission had Dante ever started with such a heavy heart. A strange premonition assailed him that this was to be his last earthly journey. It seemed to him, as he sat alone in his room after the count departed, that Beatrice once more appeared to him. This time her face was veiled in black.

"You have come again?" he asked. "But why in black?"

With head averted she pointed to her side. He followed the silence of her gesture.

Virgil stood there, clad in sombre grey. He looked steadily at Dante. His eyes were sad and his mien grave.

"You intend once again to conduct me through the portals without hope?" cried Dante, starting back.

Virgil nodded slowly; and as he nodded, Beatrice vanished.

Dante shook with fear. After a moment he said quietly: "So be it!"

Then he raised his head. But Virgil was no longer there.

Dante knew that his time on earth was short. With a careful hand he wrote across the face of the letter he had just written: *To the magnificent and victorious lord, Lord Can Grande della Scala* and signed it *his most devoted servant, Dante Alighieri, a Florentine by birth, but not by character.*

He stared long at his separate cantos of the *Paradiso*. Should he enclose them all? But the latter half of them still required certain revisions. He decided to adhere to his original intention; he would send

out nothing from his hand that was not wholly perfect. Let God dispose of him and his work as He wished!

He called in his servant and gave instructions to take the letter and the earlier cantos to Can Grande. When the servant was gone, he sat for a while in thought. He didn't wish the remainder to lie around for prying eyes to see. But where could he secrete them until his return—if he *did* return?

There was a hollow niche within one wall, where a previous occupant had kept the image of his patron saint. Dante had covered the niche with a little mat that betrayed no sign of the opening beneath.

He rose, gathered up his manuscript, and thrust it within the niche. Then he smoothed the mat back into position. When he returned, he would make his last revisions. If he didn't they would remain with God, for Whose glory they had been written.

He set sail on the blue Adriatic in a small Genoese vessel that had been trading along the coast. The Captain was ill at ease at proceeding to Venice, for there was bad blood between the Venetians and the Genoese; but a heavy sum in gold decided him. With Dante sailed two other ambassadors chosen by Count Guido, and their servants. But Guido told Dante. "I sent them merely to add the dignity of numbers to the mission. It is on you alone that I depend to keep me from this war."

"There will be no war, Count Guido."

They reached Venice on the 25th of August, in the year of our Lord, 1321. Dante had never been to Venice. Ordinarily the strangeness of this island home of a great city, intersected with canals and ocean channels, with the buildings rising sheer from the sluggish water, would have attracted his keenest attention. But he had urgent work on hand. On every side he saw preparations that disturbed him mightily—martial preparations for impending war.

The sailors gathered on the shore gazed threateningly at these men from Ravenna. The officials of the port were sullen and gave no sign of the courtesies that were due ambassadors.

The companions of Dante were afraid. "Let us not land in this den of enemies," they begged. "Let us return forthwith and advise Count Guido of what we've seen."

"We are ambassadors," Dante told them sternly. "We have a mission to perform, and there'll be no going back until it is performed."

He wished the Genoese captain to wait for their return. But the captain was equally fearful of the Venetians.

"The season of storms is approaching," he said vaguely. "It is dangerous for me to wait."

"You will be well paid."

"What good is pay if your ship is wrecked? The Venetians have larger vessels. They will furnish you with one to take you back." And he hastily raised sail and stood out to sea.

The Doge and his Council received the ambassadors. The Doge's manner was forbidding and he addressed himself solely to Dante.

"If you were Ravenna-born, Messer Alighieri, I wouldn't treat with you," he commenced ominously. "This scoundrelly attack by Count Guido's soldiers cries out for vengeance."

"It was a mere brawl by drunken soldiers. The guilty have already been severely punished by the Count."

"It is easy to punish the tools when they have served their purpose. Ravenna has shown its ill intentions towards Venice these many years."

"Ravenna wishes nothing more than to remain at peace with all the world. The Count has authorized me to offer all necessary reparations and bind his word that there will be no more attacks on Venetian lives or property."

The Doge looked around at his Council. The Signors murmured in their beards. The murmur was in the negative.

"You see how the Council stands, Messer Alighieri. Venice must defend——"

Dante broke the laws of diplomacy. He interrupted the Doge. There was scorn and passion in his voice. "Does Venice then indeed seek any pretext, no matter what, to plunder a neighbour? Does the mighty republic of the sea act with the same avaricious haste as the meanest and smallest of the turbulent cities of Italy? Then indeed is Italy doomed; and it is time for a deliverer to rise and keep the fold against the wolves who would tear her poor sheep to pieces. Let me tell you, noble Signors, that the deliverer is at hand. He will come clad in lightnings and holding peace and justice in either hand. Under his rule there will be no Venice, no Ravenna, no Florence or Arezzo to quarrel and tear at each other's throats. There will be a universal kingdom, and the world will breathe in freedom, as it has been prophesied in the Scriptures."

Dante's fellow ambassadors were aghast. What manner of madman was at their head? Now Venice was mortally offended and perhaps even their own lives were forfeit. The Council stirred and black looks flew from one to the other.

But the Doge looked at the blazing ambassador with a quickened interest. "Still the poet, eh, Messer Alighieri?"

"No longer a poet, but a prophet."

"Ah, yes, I read your *De Monarchia* with a good deal of attention. Tell me, Messer Alighieri, you don't really believe that the hundred pieces of Italy could ever be united in a single kingdom, much less that world of which you speak?"

"Why not? Didn't the Romans rule the world and keep the *pax Romana*?"

"It was different in those days." The Doge settled himself comfortably in his chair. "Let me explain. . . ."

The ambassadors breathed easier. The crisis had passed, though the Council stirred with restless looks.

The Doge held long conversations with Dante. He was a keen controversialist and enjoyed honing his mind against this sharp-edged sword.

When they returned eventually to the business in hand, he said with some cordiality: "I suggest, Messer Alighieri, you return to Count Guido and bring me more concrete proposals and the power to sign and conclude them. Our Council, you may have noted, is a trifle stubborn in this matter. That will give them ample time in which to reflect and consider."

Dante bowed. "I'm ready to leave as soon as you can furnish me with a ship."

"A ship? I'm afraid I can't. The Council is angry enough as it is. Why don't you go by land along the coast? You'll make better time."

There was truth in that. Dante was anxious to get back and lay the case before Count Guido. On any day there might be a clash between the outposts and then nothing could prevent the outbreak of war.

The September rains had commenced when he started with his company. They found a small boat to ferry them past the great seawalls of Venice and down to the marshy delta of the Po.

Drenched and shaking they took shelter for the evening in the Benedictine Abbey of Pomposa, stately with its towers, where the white-robed monks gave them food and beds.

In the morning it was still raining, and the mud of the marshes stirred and rose in pestilential vapours that clogged the air.

"You'd better wait here until the rain is ended," advised the monks. "The marshes are unhealthy when it rains."

Dante shook his head. "We must continue," he said. "We have no time to waste. It is peace or war we bring."

He gathered his unwilling companions and they set out across the steamy marshes. From the Abbey he had borrowed horses and the beasts slithered and plodded through the bubbling mud while the thick rain pelted them and poured inside their cloaks.

The others wished to turn back but he drove them on. A fierce exultation seized him. He was older than they yet no adverse elements could stop him. He remembered his terrible journey across the Alps on his way to Paris. This was a mere jaunt in comparison.

Mile after mile they rode. The insects rose in swarms to bite both man and beast. The rain ceased, and the air grew sultry. The sun

sucked up the vapours from the mire and rolled them into steaming fog. The ground gurgled and pulled at them until the very guide declared he knew not whether he was lost or not.

The heat became insupportable and the insects were like fiery needles. Dante began to shiver and pulled his cloak closer about his frame. The others stared at him and their faces grew grave. But there was no place to take shelter, and they splashed wearily on.

As the sun waned in the west, Dante felt his limbs grow fluid as running water. There was a great thirst in his mouth, yet he dared not drink from the scummy marsh. His head seemed light and many times its size. The forms of his companions blurred and the black line of the horizon started to dance. It seemed to him that he began to sing. People spoke to him, but they were obviously telling him to stop his singing. Why should he? Hadn't he the right to sing a song of his own composition? He began again:

*All ye that pass along Love's trodden way,
Pause ye awhile and say
If there be any grief like unto mine—*

His companions spoke to one another. "Messer Alighieri has the swamp fever. What can we do?"

"Nothing except ride until we get to Ravenna."

One rode close to him to support his shaking frame. So huge was his trembling that it seemed a miracle he remained on horse.

But Dante thrust the arm angrily aside. Ha! would they employ force to prevent his singing? He glared around with the blaze of fever in his eyes and shouted unintelligible words.

So they let him be and rode warily alongside. Pray God they would get to Ravenna in time!

As evening blurred the landscape they trod on dry ground and entered the Pinetta. The cool, sweet air seemed to revive Dante. His senses returned. They trotted through the gates and into the city. Count Guido was awaiting them. A courier had galloped ahead to notify him.

When he saw Dante, he was frightened. He forgot the terms of war and peace. "Good Heavens, my Dante, you are ill! Get to bed and I'll call a physician."

Dante swayed. He could hardly stand. "Not before I report what I have done. The Doge wishes me to tell you—to tell you——"

He fell unconscious and they carried him to his home. Fiduccio de' Milotti was summoned in a hurry. He took one look at his unconscious friend and his face changed.

"I am afraid, Your Grace, Messer Alighieri is dying!"

CHAPTER XXVI

*Here power failed to the high fantasy;
But my desire and will now from afar
Was turning—as a wheel turned evenly—
The Love that moves the sun and every star.*

Paradiso

PIETRO and Jacopo were summoned to the bedside of their dying parent. Beatrice came from her holy meditations and prayed for his departing soul. Dino Perini sobbed aloud. The students and disciples stood humbly by and spoke in low whispers among themselves. Count Guido was busy with a second embassy to Venice, in accordance with the proposals brought by Dante, yet he managed every morning and every evening to visit the bed of the chiefest ornament of his court. Fiduccio exhausted his skill with remedies and cooling infusions, but he knew there was no hope.

Dante lay on his bed and knew them not. His eyes burned upward with a fixed and eager gaze. He was reliving the long and varied past; soon he would relive the future.

The close walls of his room spread open and became a Court of Love. Someone was softly singing and a lute strummed. A little girl in a goodly crimson dress turned towards him gravely. He ran to her with longing arms. "Beatrice, art thou here?" he cried.

But ere he reached her a voice spoke deeply: "Behold! the new life beginneth!" and he found himself upon a street in Florence. A slender maiden all in green came towards him. Her eyes unfathomable smiled on him and she gave him infinite greeting. Timidly he touched her rustling dress, but it turned under his hand to the stiffness of a shroud. With a great cry he shrank away, while an endless stream of angels moved up the ladder of heaven, bearing tenderly before them a white, pure cloud that had the shape of Beatrice.

Sobbing his despair Dante rode across a bloody plain, hacking his way through headless bodies that carried their heads like lanterns. As he sobbed and slashed, the heads leaped back upon the bodies, and Boniface strode across the plain, sowing the whirlwind with either hand.

With an imperious gesture he beckoned to Dante. "Recite with me,"

he spoke with an ironic smile, "the Fourth Eclogue of Virgil." In unison they recited:

*Magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur vido,
Jam redit et Virgo; redeunt Saturna regna;
Jam nova progenies coelo demittitur alto.*

"A new age impends; Justice returns, and the first time and a new progeny from heaven descends."

"What is he muttering so fiercely?" Dino asked in fear.

Fiduccio straightened from his patient. "Virgil's prophecy," he said, and crossed himself, though he was not religious.

But Virgil himself rose out of the earth and drove Boniface away with scourges, while Caesar and Augustus stilled the whirlwind and beckoned to a line of misty monarchs to advance and enter upon their heritage.

The plain rolled up in a scroll of fire that blazed with the walls and towers of Florence. The flames leaped and roared, yet Florence was not consumed; for deep within the clear and shining blaze a stake waited for its occupant. A legend writhed red-tongued across the stake: *Dante Alighieri, a Florentine by birth, but not by character, shall be burned with fire until he die.*

Dante fled from his funeral pyre and found himself forthwith in a dark and gloomy wood. He was lost and knew not which way to turn. Figures leaped out from the dense coverts and danced in hideous phantasmagoria about him. A lean she-wolf howled at his heels, and a lion roared until the sky burst and fell upon them. A girl danced madly, whirling a spotted leopard at her bosom. "I am Pietra!" she mocked, and thrust the whirling beast with stiffened claws upon him. A buxom girl clapped her hands. "Good!" she cried. "Give him the beast he once pushed on me." Then Nella began to weep. "Pity me who was used by Dante as a screen."

Gemma moved through the howling whirl. Her glance was compassionate. "You will save me, Gemma!" Dante groaned. But as he spoke her features changed and became old and spiteful.

"How dare you call on me for help!" she shouted. "Go to your wenches! Lock the door and read your books! Go to Beatrice! Go to Aristotle! Go to Pietra! Go to your Thomas! Go to Hell!" Her voice became a shriek. "Ho, demons, beasts, spirits! Fall upon this man who took my youth and made me into what you see! Rend him! Tear him! Crush him!"

The rout of whirling figures rushed in upon Dante. He broke off branches to defend himself; but each branch that he broke spurted

blood and the riven trunk made moan: "Why pluckest thou me? Is there no touch of mercy in thy breast?"

"He will fall from his bed in his delirium," said Jacopo, and the tears rolled down his cheeks. "Hold our father, Pietro."

"No, let him be," said Fiduccio, the physician. "The fit has passed. See how quiet and exhausted he lies."

The nun, Beatrice, prayed on. "My prayers have had effect," she spoke quietly. "His look of terror is gone. His face is peaceful, yet filled with a holy joy."

"Rather, my last drug has taken effect," muttered Fiduccio to himself.

But Dante heard not the stir and murmur of the people gathered at his bed. Naked and defenceless to the horde that rushed to rend him, in his extremity he cried: "Beatrice! Lady Beatrice! Come to the aid of him who has ever adored you!"

At the sound of the blessed name the hellish rout whirled and ran screaming back into the forest. The heavens parted and down a shining path came Beatrice. She was clad in white flame, and a glory was upon her face.

"It was time you called on me," she said. "You were almost past all help."

"In my worst moments your image never left my mind," said Dante, shaking. "Even when I caroused with Forese and lusted after the mountain girl, Pietra, you were ever before me."

She wiped his stained and darkened countenance with the hem of her robe. "Pray to the Virgin who bore Christ, my Dante. Only she may save you now."

He bowed to his knees and raised his face.

"O Virgin mother, daughter of thy Son!" he prayed. "Created beings all in lowliness surpassing, as in height above them all—here art thou to us, of charity and love as the noonday torch; here art thou to mortal men a living spring of hope."

"So mighty art thou, lady, and so great, that he, who grace desireth, and comes not to thee for aid, is like one who desires to fly without wings. Not only him who asks, thy bounty succours; but doth freely oft forerun the asking. Whatso'er may be of excellence in creature—pity mild, relenting mercy, large munificence—are all combined in thee."

"Here kneeleth a suppliant to thee, imploring grace, seeking to lift his eyes towards the bliss supreme."

Down the steep path from Heaven came the Virgin Mary, mild, beneficent, crowned with healing. A trail of angels followed, wings poised and shining. "Ave, Maria, gratia plena!" they sang, and the firmament resounded with their harmony.

"She has heard thy prayer and granted it," said Beatrice with a smile of joy: "Come, Dante, come with me!"

She raised him and they sped together up the path of glory.

"He is delirious again," whispered Pietro. "See how he strains up from his bed as though he would attempt to fly. He speaks as though there were presences in his room. His eyes stare at nothingness."

But Beatrice, the nun, fell on her knees. Her eyes, too, were fixed upon the ceiling. "Our father is not delirious," she said. "He is going straight to Heaven. Don't you see the blessed Virgin and a shining Lady by her side? They have come to take him on the true and only path. Kneel, you men of little faith, and pray with me."

But the men stared at the ceiling and at each other. They shook their heads and felt uneasy. They saw nothing except a dying man who had lifted himself from his bed and was talking broken phrases.

Only Dino fell upon his knees beside the nun. For it seemed in truth that he saw again, clothed in mist and wonder, that Lady upon whom he had once intruded; and by her side there was a shimmering light.

"The powers of imagination are strange and mighty," thought Fiduccio the physician. "I must investigate them further when I have the chance."

But Dante, led by Beatrice and guided by the Virgin, was already risen to the Empyrean. A river of light surrounded him; and from this river living sparks uprose and sank among the flowers that blazed like rubies by the golden stream. He drank of the stream and beheld a yellow lake around which, tier on tier, as petals from the heart of a rose, sat all the blessed robed in white. Overhead, like jewelled bees, the angels dipped and brought surpassing love and joy from God eternally renewed.

Dante turned to his guides. Unspoken was his prayer for the culminating vision of God. Smiling, they bade him gaze aloft. In a single flash he gazed into the everlasting splendour. The universe became a mighty volume bound with love, in which all things had their proper place and order. The mystery of the Trinity lay revealed—three orbs of triple colours, one reflected from the other as rainbow is from rainbow, and the third, of purest fire, breathed equally on both.

He staggered under the tremendous impact; then, with Beatrice glowing at his side, he plunged into the final core.

Fiduccio closed the dead man's eyes. Pietro and Jacopo filled the room with sobbing and the students sobbed with them. Count Guido stood silent and bemused. Report had just come from Venice that the articles of peace had at last been signed, but he felt no gladness. Dante

Alighieri, who had brought the peace about, who had raised Ravenna to a place of princely learning, was dead.

Only Beatrice, the nun, and Dino Perini did not join the weeping. A splendour still abode within the chamber. Dante Alighieri, father and beloved master, was not dead. This body which remained, chill and silent, was not he. *He* had gone to eternal bliss and glory.

Count Guido Novello da Polenta, lord of Ravenna, gave Dante Alighieri a noble funeral. He caused the dead man to be placed upon a funeral bier and wreathed his brow with poet's laurel. The people of Ravenna came in endless numbers to gaze their last upon the mighty dead who had so long adorned their city. The students and disciples came and burst into lamentations. The light had departed from their midst; where now could they seek instruction?

In death they saw the full strength of the bearded face. It was calm and grave, and the forehead was lined with thought. If jutting nose and eyebrows seemed to lift upon the scene with scorn, the mouth was tender and surpassing sweet.

"There'll never be another like this Dante," they said to one another. "Italy is a widow among nations."

Pietro spoke to his brother, Jacopo. "I don't understand it. There are thirteen cantos of our father's *Paradiso* missing. I know he completed them, yet I've searched everywhere."

Jacopo smiled amid his tears. "Search behind the little mat on the wall in his private chamber. You will find a recess and the missing cantos within them."

"How do you know?"

"Our father appeared to me in a dream last night. He took me by the hand and led me to his chamber. He lifted the mat and showed me a niche. 'What you seek,' he said, 'is here.' Then he vanished."

When the people had filed before the bier, chosen men of Ravenna bore the dead man on their shoulders to the church of the Franciscans. There, after Count Guido had made a speech, commending him who had died, and the churchly offices were ended, they lowered the body into its last sarcophagus.

Barely was Dante Alighieri lowered when a horseman spurred in dust and haste to the church, dismounted, and came inside.

"I am from Florence," he announced. "We have heard of the death of Dante Alighieri, a Florentine. I am come to claim his body for burial in his native town."

Count Guido looked quietly at the hasty messenger.

"You are too late, you people of Florence," he said. "Dante Alighieri belongs now to Ravenna and to the ages."

NOTE

The author hopes that the reader of his novel will be tempted to turn, if he has not already done so, to Dante's own works as to a fountainhead for the perpetual refreshment of mind and spirit.

The chief of these works, of course, is *The Divine Comedy*. Though there are in existence scores of translations of this mighty poem, three may in particular be recommended for the modern reader. Probably the best, as well as the latest, is the translation by Jefferson Butler Fletcher (Macmillan, 1931) which manages to approximate the lovely rhyme scheme of the original and yet retain a reasonable fidelity to phrase and thought. For an excellent prose rendition which is literal and accurate, try the Carlyle-Okey-Wicksteed version, conveniently to be had in the Modern Library series. For those who prefer the epic qualities of blank verse, Henry F. Cary's translation is still adequate.

But the reader is urged not to pause with *The Divine Comedy*. Let him sample the strange beauties of *The New Life*, exquisitely turned into English by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and *On the Monarchy*, which should prove particularly interesting in the light of the present-day search for a plan of world organization.

The author has used a variety of translations in his quotations from Dante's works. He has even dared to try his own hand in the turn of certain phrases in order to clarify their meaning. The quotations from *The New Life* are all from Rossetti. Those from *The Divine Comedy* are either from Fletcher or Cary. These may be readily distinguished—Fletcher's are in rhyme and Cary's in blank verse. The songs of Dante and his contemporaries are from Rossetti or E. H. Plumptre.

I am greatly indebted to the Macmillan Company for permission to quote eleven passages from the translation of *The Divine Comedy* by Jefferson Butler Fletcher, published by them.

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